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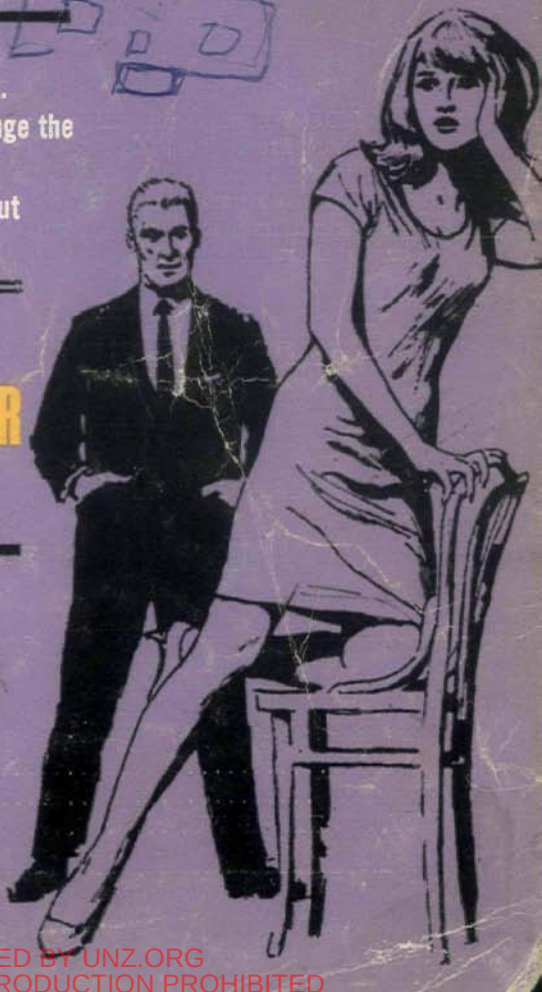

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SHELL SCOTT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1966 Vol. 2, No. 3

NEW COMPLETE SHELL SCOTT NOVEL

THE CAUTIOUS KILLERS

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

This girl was a little—not too little—bit of all right, and the place she took me to was class all over. There was only a thing or two wrong. The man I had been talking to was full of bullets and I knew that at least one had been meant for me!

. . . . . 2 to 56

NEW COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

THE CROOKED WINDOW
HARRY WHITTINGTON ..... 64 to 101

When his girl went in the door, she said she'd be back any minute. But the minutes stretched to hours and the warm lady became a cold corpse—and suddenly without knowing why, he was a hunted man on the lam.

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THE CAUTIOUS KILLERS

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A NEW, COMPLETE SHELL SCOTT NOVEL

I didn't know too much about this tomato, nor the place she took me to. All I knew was: one minute there was girl-talk, the next—bullet-talk, meant directly for me!

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

HER NAME WAS Jasmine, and she had asked me to call her Jazz.

The name fitted her well enough, I guess. At least she smelled good, and she sure *looked* jazzy.

I knew quite a bit about how she looked, since we'd had two previous dates earlier this week. And I knew she smelled splendid because, on two occasions, both of them at her apartment door, I had managed to get a sniff of something wildly seductive—*Sortilege,* I think —which she dabbed behind her ears. Whether she dabbed it anywhere else I had not the faintest idea. It may thus be apprehended by those of keen perception that shapely and saucy little Jazz had begun to strike me as perhaps a bit waltzy.

This, then, was our third, and

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possibly last waltz, although she had given me to understand that tonight's expedition into the dizzy night life of Hollywood might prove more charming than the first couple.

At least I *thought* she had. Hints, anyhow. If you can call unbelievably steamy glances from hot brown eyes a hint. Or the twitchy-puckery promise of tomato-red lips clearly on the verge of spontaneous combustion. Or occasional long sighs of such magnitude that it had struck me as at least possible one more such would remove entirely the form-fitting blue-silk strapless cocktail gown clinging to her 38-23-36, which was a lot of numbers for a kid only five feet, three inches tall.

I thought of Jazz's long sighs as passionate, but that's merely an assumption, because it is pretty hard to tell when a gal is engrossed in putting away a meal suitable for two famished longshoremen.

This filly ate like a horse. Not noisily, or whinnying, nothing like that; it was merely that she could put away more goose liver and steak and potatoes and salad and vegetables and *crepes Suzette* and *cafe diablo* than anybody of her size that I'd ever seen. I could understand how she *got* that dandy shape; but how she kept it was a moot question which I was not equipped to moot.

She sighed once more. "Oh, my," she said, lassooing me with one of those sexy glances, "that was good. That *was* good, Shell."

We had just had dinner at a romantically isolated restaurant called the Hideout, not far from downtown Hollywood. It was secluded, dimly-lighted, resting atop a hill overlooking several million lights of Hollywood and its suburbs, like L.A.—and expensive. An ordinary meal would run about fifteen bucks; Miss Jasmine Porter's Lucullan repast, complete with oddments *a la carte,* came to forty-two sixty, which I had a faint feeling was impossible.

Fortunately, I could afford a little Jazz. Maybe not two or three times every week, but this week. I had recently successfully concluded a six-day job for a wealthy client—the "Shell" which Jazz had called me is from the *Sheldon* in *Sheldon Scott, Investigations*—and thus could even have bought myself a forty-two-sixty meal if I were nuts, and if it had been possible for me to cram that much food into my six feet, two inches and two-hundred and six pounds, which it wasn't.

I said, "You want another?"

"Another what?"

"Another meal."

"Of course not. That was plenty."

I smiled. "Well, then, what would you like to do now, Jazz? Take a nap for a few hours? Drive up into the hills and snooze on Lover's Lane? Run around the block—"

"Goodness, no. No, no, Shell." She gave me the eyes, and the twitchy-pucker of lips, and a gale-

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like undulation of breathing. "I told you tonight was going to be different, didn't I?"

"Yeah, that's why I thought maybe you wanted another dinner. That would be diff—"

"That's not . . . quite . . . what I mean."

Boy, when she turned it all on like that, the eyes and lips and *Sortilege* voice and bazoomy communication, a guy could almost hear colorful music: babes clacking castanets and screaming, gals zithing zithers and waving their plectrums—colorful noises, anyway.

I listened to the crazy noises and my smile became more smiley, and I said, "All right, then. What would you like to do, Jazz?"

"Whatever you'd like to do, Shell."

"Then follow me, dear. Out there—" I pointed toward a tall, wide window and the brilliant lights beyond it—"is romance, adventure, danger, even booze. I refer, of course, to my apartment. And that's where we're going!"

"Wonderful!"

I got up, dropped approximately a pound of money on the waiter's tray and the check, slid the chair out from under Jazz's delectable thirty-six, let her drape a hand on my arm, and we started out.

We almost made it.

Just inside the front door and at one end of the long view-window filling one wall of the dining room, a man and woman were seated at a table for two, drinking some kind of liqueur from thimble-sized glasses.

I recognized the guy, a local attorney named Vincent Blaik, but since he was merely an acquaintance I nodded and was going to go right on by.

But Jasmine also recognized the girl.

"Lynn!" she cried, in the tone of approaching ecstasy gals often use in greeting any female who is not a total stranger. "How nice!"

The lovely called Lynn—and she was a lovely—looked up and smiled. But the smile appeared to begin and end on her lips. "How nice," she echoed. "Jasmine! It's so good to see you!" She sounded as happy as a sore loser halfway through hari-kari.

Then they went on into the *how've-you-been?* and *it's-been-too-long-since,* and such.

"Hi," I said to Blaik.

" 'Lo, Scott."

He lifted an eyebrow, glanced at the two girls, lowered the brow and looked at me.

"Sit down, Scott," he said. "Join us."

"Well, thanks, but we were on our way out."

"Yeah, you were," he said. He glanced at the girls again.

"—and then Arly—you remember Arly, don't you?" Jazz was saying. "Well, she and Art went out on the deck and—" she leaned over and whispered something, which try

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as I might I couldn't catch, into Lynn's ear.

"No!" said Lynn.

"Yes!" Jazz cried.

"Hey," I said. "Jazz. The romance, and adventure, and danger. Remember? And—"

She flipped the burning brown eyes at me.

"Oh, shush," she said smiling.

"—and booze. Out there in the wilds—"

"It'll still be there, Shell."

"Yeah. But maybe we won't."

Yacketa, yacketa.

"Or maybe you won't," I continued. "Maybe *I* won't."

Blaik grinned. "Care to join us for a drink, Scott?"

"Why, thanks, Blaik. Don't mind if I do. Jazz may join us in a little while, I guess."

"Fine. What are you drinking?"

I told him, pulled over a couple of nearby chairs, and sat down. Blaik captured a waiter's attention, gave him the order. When the drinks came Jazz was seated, leaning forward a bit and saying, "It was, too, Arly. But you know Art."

"Just don't I?" Lynn said, rolling her eyes.

They were very pretty eyes. Large, wide-set, green. A moist, dark green, the color of bruised mint leaves. She was leaning back in her chair, not saying much, apparently content to let Jazz do the talking. The quiet type, I guessed, though she didn't look like the quiet type. I guessed she was no more than twenty-one or twenty-two years old, but she looked pretty flamboyant to me.

Maybe part of it was those eyes and the sensual, crushed-looking lips. Probably part of it was the dress she wore, some kind of softly-shimmering cloth as black as her short-cut and casually-tousled hair, the dress which rested so smoothly against her skin it might almost have been black dye spilled over her full body.

It took about five minutes, but by then the girls had covered all the essential trivialities and we'd even had time for introductions. The quiet but explosively dressed lovely was Lynn Duncan, and I already knew, from listening to Jazz's volubility and Lynn's almost monosyllabic comments, that until six months ago she'd lived in Miami, Florida, and since moving to Hollywood had been working at the "Skylight," whatever that was, and was single, drank *creme de menthe* after dinner and straight bourbon the rest of the time, liked the new hip-length dresses but hadn't dared to wear one yet, and was wild about the latest boy-singer singing rage, Weenie Latour.

At least, when Jazz informed her that I was a private detective, she'd looked at me long enough to know I have stick-up-in-the-air hair that is white, as springy as thin quills, and just about as long as the equally-white hair in my peaked eyebrows; that my eyes are gray, my

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chops deeply tanned, my chin at least resolute if not ponderous; that my nose has either been broken several times and put back where it was every time but the last, or at least broken twice and amusingly set once, which is the fact; that there's a small scar over my right eye and a piece cut or bitten or sliced or shot—shot's the one—from the tip of my left ear; and that the total conglomeration of my features lends credence to belief that it may have participated in a riot, or been struck with determination by a crowd of knuckles.

I looked out at the view. For almost half a mile there were only scattered lights, but then the sparkle and brilliance of the city below began, white and frosty and red and blue and green, individual dots blending more and more into an abstract mass of color the farther the eye reached.

There was only one road up to the top of the hill where the Hideout sat, and the view had been selected so diners could not only get the full impact of the city at night, but see arriving cars come up the two-lane asphalt to the circle before the restaurant's entrance. The circle where, with military snap and dispatch, two magnificently-attired attendants opened doors, whisked cars away to the large parking lot hidden in darkness on the right.

It was said that many ladies and even some of their escorts enjoyed

knowing that numerous curious—and, hopefully envious—eyes could note their arrivals. On a good night, at least. But this was Tuesday, only a little after seven-thirty, early on a slow evening in September, and there weren't more than a dozen eyes in the joint.

Another car was now coming up the road. Its headlights lit the black asphalt, but at the top swung left toward the darkened lot, rather than into the brilliance and uniformed-attendant splendor before the entrance. This one clearly preferred parking his car himself, rather than leaving it with the attendants and later buying it back, like sensible people. It made me a little curious.

A miser, forced to bring his wife

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to the Hideout? I wondered. Or a guy with a gal wearing one of the old-style dresses, with its hem almost down to her kneecaps? A guy with somebody else's wife? Or quite possibly, I thought more generously, a high-school kid with his sweetie, doing optimistic addition and substraction in his head.

Jazz appeared to have forgotten I was only about six inches from her ear. I could smell the *Sortilege* again. I was like a guy gaining ground while losing the earth, and I had to think of something.

Then suddenly the gals stood up simultaneously and murmured they'd be "back in a jiffy." Neither of them had mentioned it. Neither said, "Let's go to the johnny, honey," or "Shall we freshen something up, dear?" Nothing. Just *click*, and they were on their way. I presume it's telepathy.

Blaik said, "Gorgeous little gal, that Jasmine."

"Yeah. So's Lynn. And Lynn doesn't talk so much."

"She does seem more than usually quiet tonight."

"Can't get a squeal in edgewise, maybe."

"You sound disgruntled, Scott. Should dudgeon continue to gather in your psyche, you can give me the little lady's number before you kill yourself."

"I may give it to you before we leave."

He grinned. Vincent Blaik was a bachelor like me. Only he was five or six years over my thirty. Blaik was a solid five-ten, maybe a bit chunky at a hundred and ninety pounds or so, with a square face, muscular cheeks, brown hair several inches longer than mine and wavy, combed straight back from the slightly-off-center widow's peak like a litle comma punctuating his hairline.

I'd been hearing about Blaik and reading of his brilliant courtroom techniques and strategy—he was a much-sought-after attorney for the defense, with his own offices and staff—for several years now. But this was the first time we'd actually sat down and talked. He struck me as a much nicer chap than I'd assumed he would be, because among the things I'd heard were rumors that his ethics and morality were not exactly above reproach.

He had a long string of courtroom successes, and a few flops, behind him. I'd heard some of those successes might have been achieved with the aid of such illicit techniques as jury tampering, bribing, even, perhaps, intimidation of hostile witnesses. He was also alleged to have an abundance of political pull which he was not averse to using, too-close connections with a couple of Superior Court judges, and intimate acquaintance with a number of the kings and princes of hoodlumland.

But every defense attorney takes on clients accused of, or even pre-

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viously convicted of, crime; that's his job, his purpose and function. And rumors are spread about many of them, rumors very often completely groundless. I didn't know whether any of the rumors about Blaik were true or not; and until I did, I meant to assume they were baloney.

So, instead of shop talk, I said, "You have dinner here, Blaik? Or just those little dinky drinks?"

"Hell of a dinner. Didn't have any idea the food was so good here."

"First time?"

He nodded. "Yeah, Lynn suggested the place. I'm glad she did."

"Yeah. Prime ribs were mine. Jazz had the Chateaubriand. It was only a small one."

He was silent for a few seconds. Then he said, "Well, when you feel like it, I'll take her phone number anyhow."

I grinned. "What do you want Jazz's number for, when you're with Lynn? Nothing repulsive about your Miss Duncan."

He shrugged. "Not my Miss Duncan. She's just—well, call it combining business with pleasure."

I kept grinning. He could call it business if he wanted to, but it looked more like pleasure to me.

"No kidding!" someone said behind me. I looked around. The gals were already on their way back from the powder room. After maybe two minutes. Remarkable. Must have run out of powder. Usually they're in there at least three quarters of an hour.

Blaik had paid his check when he ordered the last drinks, and as the girls arrived and I stood up saying we had to hit the road.

Blaik said, "Time for us to take off, too."

Lynn sat down, saying, "I'd like another drink, Vince. Let's stay a while." But Jazz, I was pleased to note, remained standing and grabbed hold of my arm.

Blaik was arguing mildly with Lynn. She said she truly would prefer to stay a while longer; actually, she didn't feel too well. She did look pale to me. Maybe she needed oxygen. She couldn't afford to breathe very deeply wearing that black outfit. But finally Blaik grabbed Lynn's hand and hauled her to her feet.

We all walked out together, Jazz squeezing my arm. "That didn't take long, did it? Now we can go out into the wildness, or whatever you called it. And I've already got part of my dinner digested."

"I'll bet it's all digested. You have a unique metabolism—"

That was the last word for a while. From any of us.

We'd gone down the steps, Blaik and Lynn ahead of us, and he'd walked forward to give one of the two attendants his parking check. Just as the gray-tuxedoed youngster turned and started to trot toward the darkened lot I heard a car engine start over there.

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The sound stuck oddly in my brain. At first I thought the other attendant must be over there, but both were here, one of them moving away now. Then I wondered how many attendants they had at the Hideout. Another thought was forming, too, but it had time only to wiggle.

I'd taken a step toward Blaik, ready to hand the other parker my ticket. Blaik was still a few feet ahead of me, Jazz behind on my right, Lynn standing back and to my left, waiting.

As I took another step, with the hand holding the square cardboard check I half-consciously tapped my coat over the .38 Colt Special always there in the clamshell holster. It's always there, because whenever I'm out in the city I know that more than one other guy who would like to see me dead is there too. That didn't mean they'd do anything about it, though it has for sure been tried before. But, because it might be termed an occupational hazard, I'm always aware of the possibility.

Besides, that thought was just starting to wiggle.

Nobody had left the restaurant before us. And I was remembering nobody had come into the Hideout, either, since I'd seen that car come up the asphalt road. Why would anybody drive up and just sit out there? Those high school kids, maybe? Or maybe—

That was it.

The sound, even out in the open without walls and ceiling to bounce from, was hellishly loud. Gunshots —five maybe six of them, fast— one isolated shot, followed by a second, and then three or four more one after the other, almost blending into one. Before the second shot sounded I'd hit the cement parking circle and was rolling, snub-nosed Colt coming out of the holster, and my brain tagging the sound as the heavy, full-bodied boom of a .45.

I saw Blaik flop, heard screams from the girls behind me. A gray blur was the second attendant spinning around and starting to run. The car's engine was racing and over its sound was the screech of tires spinning. On both skinned knees and with one hand on the cement, steadying me, I saw the car jumping forward, sliding, heading down the road.

I slapped the revolver toward the fast-moving car and squeezed off a shot, followed it with two more. I heard at least one slug hit something. But the car leaped forward and down the hill, picking up speed fast.

I got to my feet, crammed the Colt into its holster, turned back toward the restaurant's steps. The back of my left hand was stinging and there was a red streak on the skin. One of those flying slugs had barely nicked it.

Jazz was straightening up, rubbing one knee.

Her eyes were blank, staring,

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glazed with shock. She straightened up and let both arms fall to her sides, breathing through her mouth, staring. Her face was chalk-white.

Lynn was lying half on her back, one leg flopped awkwardly over the other. The small irregularly shaped dark pool near her head was blood. There was a cough and groan from behind me.

I turned around. Blaik was on his knees, sitting on the back of his heels, bending forward with both arms pressed against his mid-section. I jumped toward him, squatted next to him.

"Blaik," I said, "are you all right? You get hit?"

He pulled his head up, looked at me. Blood was on his mouth. His lips stretched as he tried to smile.

"It's . . . nothing," he said, and died.

2

A WAITER HAD already phoned for the police and an ambulance by the time I got inside. As he hung up the phone I grabbed it, dialed the LAPD and got transferred to Homicide. In a minute I had Phil Samson, Captain of Central Homicide, and my very good and longtime friend, on the other end of the line.

"Sam," I said, "Shell. Shooting here at the Hideout just now, Vincent Blaik killed. Somebody else already called it in, so cars should be on their way from the Hollywood Division."

"You all right?"

"Yeah. Scratch on my hand, but Blaik's dead and a girl named Lynn Duncan got one along the side of her head. She's still breathing but that's all I know."

"Scratch on your hand? Stray bullet? Or was the guy aiming at you?"

"That's what I'd like to find out. Sam—main reason I called. Dig up whatever you have on Blaik, will you? If you come up with anything to indicate some gun might have been after him, it would help my peace of mind."

"Nothing's going to help your peace of mind. But okay. You see anything might help us?"

"Just the car. Can't even tell you the make. Dark sedan, new one. Didn't get even a glimpse at the guy. It happened all of a sudden, and I was moving pretty fast once it started happening."

"You coming downtown?"

"Soon as I can. One thing, Sam. I took three shots at the car and hit it at least once. Left side somewhere."

We talked another minute, then I went out front again.

Right after the shooting four or five people had come charging out to see what was going on, screaming and yelling and pointing. The usual gathering, brilliant as lemmings heading for the sea. I left one of the attendants near Lynn's un-

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conscious body, with instructions to keep people away from her. She lay just as she'd been before, still breathing.

Jazz was sitting on one of the steps, arms crossed in front of her, shivering a little. I draped my coat over her shoulders, asked her if she'd seen anything that might help identify the killer. She hadn't. Neither had either of the gray-uniformed attendants.

The one who'd been waiting to take my car check had simply run about a block, then finally come back. When I talked to the young guy who'd been trotting toward the lot he said, "I heard the shooting and plain hit the deck." He'd hit it pretty hard, too; his chin was skinned and a little blood had dripped on to his shirt and tie.

"How about the car?" I asked him. "He must have been parked in the lot for several minutes. In fact, I'm pretty sure I saw him drive up and turn in there."

"Sure, so did I," he said. "But the kids come up here to neck sometimes. Usually after closing, but not always. It's a great view." He shrugged. "I figured that's all it was. What the hell? Why would I worry about it? Some guys like to park their own cars. Who'd think some crazy guy'd start shooting?"

He was right, of course. Who would? More important too, who'd been the target? Blaik—or me?

Those slugs had covered a pretty wide area. The bullet which nicked my left hand had either been fired *at* me, or the gunman had missed Blaik by at least four or five feet. Another slug had whistled past close to my head, too.

Judging by the spot from which the shots had been fired, it must have been one of those bullets going past me which had hit Lynn. She was lucky not to be dead right now. For that matter, so was I.

The whole thing puzzled me more than a little. If the guy had been aiming for me, that also meant he'd missed me by four or five feet with at least one slug. I could think of several reasons why guys with guns might want to knock me off; and it was of course possible somebody had a motive for killing Vincent Blaik. But I couldn't think of a single reason under the sun why any man would want to kill *both* of us.

I was sure of only two things: Blaik was dead; and if the gunman had killed him by mistake, he knew he'd missed me—and still had to get me.

3

BY THE TIME I'd finished talking to officers at the scene and driven to the police building in downtown L.A., it was after nine and the story was on all the news broadcasts and telecasts. The bare facts were covered: Blaik killed; his companion Lynn Duncan shot and taken to the Emergency Re-

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ceiving Hospital with a possible skull fracture and a concussion; Shell Scott and Miss Jasmine Porter escaped serious injury.

But there was a good deal of conjecture, too; in part because Blaik had been a well-known attorney, but mainly because I'd been involved, not for the first time, in a shooting. At least one commentator wondered audibly why I had been with Blaik, and covered the same point which was in my mind by saying, "It is not yet known whether the fusillade of bullets was intended for Vincent Blaik or for Shell Scott, who was wounded in the hand. But the police are confident—" and so on.

I hadn't exactly been wounded in the hand, but more like in a thirty-second of an inch of skin; also, he made it sound as if a whole gang of hoodlums had been shooting up the place. For all I knew there could have been two, or even several, men in the car at that. Women, even. I hadn't really seen anything except a muzzle blast and a glimpse of the car itself.

I took the elevator up to the third floor and walked down the hall to the Homicide squadroom.

Samson was in his office, his big, solid jaw wiggling as he chewed on one of his stinking—but fortunately, unlighted—black cigars. As I walked in he flicked the sharp brown eyes at me, then continued growling into the phone.

In a few seconds he hung up. He took the well-chewed cigar from his mouth and gazed upon me as if noting that I had just broken out in a mass of livid pustules.

"You're a hell of a lot of trouble," he said gruffly.

"Sam, I'm wounded. It said so on the broadcasts. Is that any way to talk to—"

He swore for no more than three seconds, a remarkable three seconds admirable both for its pith and richness, then added, "Undoubtedly some would-be benefactor of all mankind was trying to kill you, yet managed to shoot Blaik. Shoot him dead. But you're wounded," He stuck the cigar back into his mouth.

"You took your time getting here," he said.

"Well, first I had to staunch the flow of my hot, red blood," I said. "And then I was out there at the scene of the crime, Sam, cooperating with the forces of law, order, decency, and justice. Namely, the fuzz. Then I had to see that my girl got home—"

"Ahk," he ejaculated. "You and your girls. Girls, girls, always—"

"What's wrong with girls?"

"It's not them, it's you."

Sam, I know for a fact, would haul me from the path of a speeding steam-roller, even if fairly certain to get squashed in the process, as for that matter I imagine I'd do for him; but only on extraordinarily rare occasions would he indicate by a single word that I was other than

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a disreputable ne'er-do-well, up to no good.

At length he said, "All right; tell me what you think happened. And how you've managed to solve the crime already."

"Well, I haven't solved it yet, Sam. Not quite. In fact, I am all at sea, would you believe it? But here are the facts." I told him what had happened.

"Jazz hadn't met Blaik." I finished, "and I didn't know the girl Blaik was with. But Jazz had met her—"

"Jazz?"

"Jasmine Porter. My girl."

"Ahk."

"Seems the Duncan gal works at a bar and restaurant called the Skylight Lounge. Part of a private country club and estates, homes on the golf course and such. Waitress out there."

"Where'd she meet Blaik?"

"Beats me. I talked to Jazz after the shooting, but she didn't know much about her. Met Lynn when she was at the Lounge for dinner a couple of times, that's all. So she told me."

Samson ran a hand over the iron-gray hair on his scalp. "That's all you got?"

"Right. You dig up anything on Blaik since I phoned?"

"Not exactly. But—well, I'll give it to you the way I got it. About six-thirty this evening a lady phoned the Hollywood division to ask about her husband. She'd been ex-

pecting him all afternoon, but he hadn't shown up and she was pretty worried about him. Far as we know, he still hasn't shown up."

"So tell Missing Persons. Why tell me, Sam?"

"The lady's name was Mrs. Moulder. Georgina Moulder."

I kept on looking blank.

"That's wonderful," I said.

"Wife of Leslie Moulder."

"Well, good old Leslie Moulder. Not *the* Les—" I stopped. "Wait a minute."

"I see you're getting it. Slow, very slow, but—"

"He's the boy fell for theft, or embezzlement or something? Went to Q a year or so ago?"

"You got it. Grand theft, sentenced to San Quentin little over a year back."

It was the kind of case I don't pay any special attention to ordinarily, and it had been in the newspapers last summer. But I remembered a little about it. Leslie

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Moulder had been tried on the charge that he'd stolen something like twenty or thirty thousand bucks from a safe to which only he and one other man had the combination.

The other man was out of town during the period when the theft must have occurred, and was able to prove it. Other details were brought out at the trial, but Moulder's defense, I recalled, had been very little defense at all. Anyhow, he'd been convicted and jugged.

So far, so good. But I knew Sam wouldn't be gassing without a point. So I probed in memory some more. I remembered Moulder and the other man had been partners. Moulder and . . . Gordon. Robert Gordon.

Gordon was much the wealthier of the two. Moulder, though not exactly out of the chips, was a contractor, a builder and developer, but on a much smaller scale than Gordon, who had hotels and country-club estates all over the landscape.

That jiggled one of the facts loose. Gordon and Moulder had cooperated in building one of those "country-club" developments here in Southern California. The Hollywood Hills Estates in Hollywood, in fact. Nine-hole golf course, clubhouse, homes on the fairways and such. Plus hotel-type accommodations, and a luxurious restaurant and bar. The Skylight Lounge.

"Oh, ho," I said: "Now I've made him. But wasn't there something else? End of the trial—"

Sam nodded. "When the verdict was read he raised a little hell."

"Yeah, only the little was a lot. Took a swing at his attorney, didn't he? Yelled the s.o.b. had sold him out. Hell, his attorney was Vincent Blaik."

"The late."

"Interesting."

"Gets more interesting. Moulder took a swing at Blaik, yes, right there in the courtroom."

Sam stopped, letting me fill it in if I could. And finally the whole story of that late-afternoon scene came back to me. "Also swore he would kill the s.o.b.—Moulder's words. Yelled it about three or four times, with some vehemence, if I recall the reports correctly."

"You do."

"So what? Moulder's in durance vile, languishing in Q. Wait a minute! Mrs. Moulder called the Hollywood boys? She was expecting her husband to show up this afternoon?"

"You do get there in time, don't you, Shell?" Samson sighed, rubbed his eyes for a moment. "That's it. Moulder did his bit. He's out."

"When? How long ago—today?"

He nodded again. "Only a few hours ago. Not so few he couldn't have made it to L.A. with some hours to spare, though."

I thought about it. "Well, I still say, so what? You don't expect me to think you'd pay any attention to

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a threat made in anger a year and more ago, do you?"

Sam shrugged. "Ordinarily, no. But we don't have much else to go on. Not yet."

Which was true. But that old "I'll kill you" line has been tossed at just about half the attorneys, policemen, D.A.s and private detectives, for that matter, in the country. And ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's no more than hot air leaking out with an excess of gripe and exasperation.

Still, I thought, there's always that one other time out of the hundred.

"Something else interesting," I said. "Moulder was one of the owners of the Hollywood Hills Estates, wherein is the Skylight Lounge, wherein it seems our Miss Lynn Duncan works. And the chap she was dining with tonight is the attorney who defended Moulder."

"Who got sprung today. Yeah, we're working on all of it."

"How is the girl?"

"In Emergency, last I checked. They're working on her head, but it's nothing serious. She'll be O.K."

"That's good. Moulder hasn't shown up yet?"

"Not the last I heard. I called Mrs. Moulder myself a couple times. Couldn't reach her about an hour ago, but talked to her at eight-thirty. No husband yet. Told me she was taking a shower when I called before. Now why would she tell me she was taking a shower?"

I grinned. "Why, Sam?" I knew what was coming.

"You, now, I could understand that. Even if she doesn't know you, she must have *heard* about you. Aren't you always talking to babes in showers?"

"Well, when they're roomy enough for both of us. And if the lady is willing, of course—"

I cut it off because Sam had dug out a big wooden match and was preparing to light his cigar. He knew I gagged on the effusion from those unbelievably redolent smokes of his, which was why he lit them. When he wanted to get rid of me, he simply started puffing, knowing I would—even when I didn't *want* to—retreat shamelessly.

"Sam," I asked him, "what are those things made out of? Poison-ivy leaves?"

He'd got the end glowing. "They are manufactured from pure horse manure," he said complacently, puffing some of the gaseous excretion at me.

"Damn sick horses," I said.

He puffed some more, an expression of quiet contentment spreading over his clean-shaven pink face.

"You could get cancer in your fingers, you know," I said. "Just from holding those things." But by then I was out of my seat and at the open door.

Usually Sam just let me go, probably feeling mild pleasure at his victory. But this time as I started

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out he said, "I guess there's no need for you to meddle in the case now. Right, Shell? I won't have to worry about you in my hair?"

"Well, *if* it was that hundred-to-one chance, and Moulder did the shooting, I suppose I can relax and forget about it. But what if it wasn't Moulder, old buddy? Besides, no matter *who* it was, I do not take kindly to fellows tossing pills so close to me as those pills were tossed tonight."

"I was afraid of that," he said.

I went out.

Home is a comfortable three-rooms-and-bath in Hollywood's Spartan Apartment Hotel, on North Rossmore opposite the grounds of the Wilshire Country Club. At ten minutes to ten I was unlocking the door of 212.

The living-room phone was ringing, but by the time I got inside, walked over the yellow-gold carpet and flopped on the low chocolate-brown divan, and grabbed the phone, nobody was on the other end of the line.

So I mixed a healthy bourbon and water in the kitchenette, took it into the bathroom, and drank it before, during, and after a quick shower. I was half dressed, up to and including trousers with no rips in the knees, when the phone rang again. This time I got to it on the second ring.

"Mr. Scott?" It was a feminine voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, good. I've been trying to reach you for over an hour. Could you please come to see me? It's dreadfully important."

"Well, I suppose so. I've, uh, a little something I'd planned to check up on, but it can wait. What's it about?"

"It's—it concerns my husband. My name is Mrs. Moulder, and I have the most ghastly apprehension—"

"What? I mean, you're who?"

"Mrs. Moulder."

"Mrs. Leslie Moulder?"

There was a brief silence. Then she said, "Oh. You know about him, then."

"Know what about him?"

"Well, he— It's very embarrassing. I'd much prefer to tell you about this in person. Would you come to my home, Mr. Scott?"

"Right away."

She gave me her address, one of the homes along the first fairway of the golf course at Hollywood Hills Estates. I finished dressing in a hurry, including my re-loaded Colt. A strange but ridiculous thought occurred to me as I pushed the revolver into its holster. Wouldn't it be funny if Leslie Moulder had in fact been the chap who'd shot at me earlier, and was now enlisting the aide of his freshly-showered wife to lure me out onto the fairways, where with a double-barreled shotgun—

Ahk, I thought, like Sam. This was a fine example of where an un-

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bridled imagination could take a guy.

I was right about that, anyway. I found the front door of the Moulder residence with ease, despite skulking over closely-mowed grass, darting from bush to palm to palm tree and such, eyes dancing and gun ready, and with no greater shock than the sight of Mrs. Georgina Moulder when she opened the door.

Only seconds after I rang she threw the door wide, and light spilled over me, and all around her as well, and though she was clad, she was not clad in enough to keep her warm if the temperature fell below eighty degrees.

"Oh," she said, as though disappointed. "Are you Mr. Scott?"

"Yeah. You called me, remember? I'm sorry, but if you were expecting somebody who looks like Lord Byron, or even Sherlock Holmes—"

"I thought perhaps it would be Leslie."

"I see. No word from your husband yet?"

"No, nothing." She squinted at me. "How did you know I was expecting him?"

"I just finished talking to the police, Mrs. Moulder. I had a rather, um, interesting experience earlier."

"You mean getting shot at?"

"Yeah. You know what happened, huh?"

"I heard it on several news programs. In fact, that's why I called you. Because your name was mentioned. But you say you talked to the police, and that's how you know I was expecting Leslie? But that means—the police don't suspect Leslie, do they? They can't suspect Leslie!"

She was stretching her features and wiggling them around, her voice going way up into the upper octaves. I was beginning to believe Mrs. Moulder might be a highly emotional tomato.

I said, Do you mind if I come inside? I feel a little—I know it's silly, really, but I'd rather not stand here in the doorway."

"Oh, of course." She stepped back and I went in.

A television set was glowing in the corner, four boys or girls playing guitars and apparently singing in a brand-new key, and Mrs. Moulder walked to the set and turned down the volume.

Standing there for a moment, she said, "I presume you know that my husband was sent to prison, and that he was released today?"

"Yes. I've a general idea of the background."

"I've visited him every week or two during this past year," she said, turning to face me. "We planned to meet here this afternoon. He distinctly did not want me to meet him at the prison. You understand?"

"Of course."

She was a big, good-looking

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woman, about thirty or possibly a couple of years older. She had a pretty face. Not beautiful, but pretty, with very large wide-set eyes, long-lashed and dark, as her most striking feature. Most striking feature of her face, at least. Good nose, warm-looking mouth. She was made up, with rouge and lipstick and whatever women put on their kissers, as though ready to go out on the town. Not dressed to go out on the town, however.

"We agreed he would fly from San Francisco to International Airport, and take a taxicab from there. I arranged for him to have sufficient money. I was to be here, waiting for him, with everything ready for him."

She waved a hand toward a long, low, black divan. Before it, on the antique-gold-mirrored top of a wide table sat a silver bucket in which was a bottle of champagne. Three vases of cut flowers added brightness and color to the room. The top of an intricately carved stereo set was raised and I could see a stack or records resting on the spindle. After a year in stir, a man would greatly enjoy a drink, some champagne, music, even fresh flowers. Then there was, of course, Mrs. Moulder.

She asked me to sit down, so I plunked onto the black divan. The ice in the champagne bucket had melted, I noticed.

As Mrs. Moulder continued talking she began pacing the floor, which was rather an interesting occupation, even though I knew she'd not been waiting for me, because she was wearing a pale-blue negligee and thin robe, or peignoir, which did not entirely conceal the outlines, and even some of the inlines, of her undeniably lush and lovely figure.

She had heavy breasts, high and pouter-pigeon plump, and now exceeding active, as though endowed with a vigorous life of their own; a strong but not thick waist; full hips and long legs. As she paced back and forth she said, "It's simply ghastly. I don't know what to do. He isn't here, and there's been no word at all from him."

She clutched the front of her peignoir, squeezed it, then released it. "He hasn't even phoned me."

I didn't say anything. It often takes even calm and collected women quite a while to get to the point. So I simply waited.

She went on for another minute: possibly Leslie had been hurt; killed in an accident; everything but eaten by sharks.

Then she stopped pacing suddenly, close in front of me, and said out of the blue, "Did you see the man who shot at you?"

I blinked. Then I said, "No, I didn't. But—are you intimating that—"

"I'm not intimating anything," she interrupted me. "I just wanted to know if you saw him, the man who shot—"

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"Mrs. Moulder, just take it easy, huh?"

Women who get all squeaky-voiced give me a perhaps unreasonable feeling of apprehension.

"I think we'll reach rational conclusions more quickly," I continued, "if we don't get hyster—if we remain more rational . . . ah, calm, relaxed. Subdued."

"I am quite relaxed," she cried. "Naturally I'm concerned—"

"Of course!" I said.

She was getting to me. The truth is, I figured it would be easier to stay relaxed and subdued, if she'd go put a brassiere and some other things on. But I could hardly tell Mrs. Moulder that.

"All right," I said finally, "let's get to it. What do you want? Want me to look for your husband, try to find him? Is it anything more than that?"

"Well, in a way, yes."

"In a way. Look, we both know of the threat your husband made against Vincent Blaik. We know your husband got out of prison today. We know Vincent Blaik was killed this evening. But I assume you do not really believe Mr. Moulder fired those shots at us. Or do you?"

"Of course not—"

"Okay. You don't think so. I don't really think so either. So what am I doing here? If there's nothing else you want to talk about, I'll leave. That will be—oh, call it twenty bucks for my time."

It shook her up a little. Which was the idea. I've had distraught lady clients before, and often it appears to pain them to tell you what they're talking about, until they think they may not get to talk about it.

She moistened her lips. A calculating look grew in her large eyes. Her nostrils pinched in a little. Then she said, "The truth is, I'm a little afraid it might have been Leslie."

"Uh-huh."

"You see, he was really innocent of the crime he was charged with. He was sent to prison an innocent man."

I tried to keep my features pleasantly vacuous.

"I see," I said.

"It was that Blaik—that rotten, stinking lawyer . . ." She let it trail off, as if realizing she was talking about a man recently dead. Then she went on, "Leslie told me *so* many times, every time I visited him in prison, that by the time he realized Mr. Blaik was absolutely incompetent, it was too late. By the time he knew he wanted another attorney, he was convicted. There was nothing he could do."

"Well, leaving that for a moment, you were saying you're a little afraid it might have been Leslie. Who shot at me, you mean?"

"Not at you. At Blaik. Why would he shoot at you?"

"Beats me."

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Georgina Moulder turned and began pacing again.

"I don't really think it could have been Leslie," she said quietly. But—if I'd only hear from him. It's just that, while he was in prison, he couldn't seem to forget if it hadn't been for Blaik he wouldn't have been there. The last few months he was even saying he thought Blaik must have lost the case deliberately. Leslie kept, oh, brooding about it."

"Why would his attorney have done that?"

"It was just an idea in Leslie's mind," she said. "I couldn't talk him out of it."

"You know your husband was innocent of the theft, Mrs. Moulder?"

"Of course."

"Pardon the question, but how? If you've got any evidence which would be—"

"Why, he's my husband! I just know."

Well, I'm a great one for loyalty, myself. But I couldn't help wishing I also had Mrs. Moulder's intuition. Probably I should hire a gal to work with me in the office. Preferably one with a shape like Mrs. Moulder's.

My thoughts were going a bit astray because Mrs. Moulder had turned around before the television set and was standing there with the light from that big TV eye squarely behind her.

"Well," I said, "I get the picture. As long as there's even a little chance that Mr. Moulder fired those shots at the Hideout, I suppose you want me to do what I can to find him?"

"Yes, and help him. If he needs help, of course."

"Help him how? To be frank, there's probably little I can do that the police can't do better."

"But that's the whole point, Mr. Scott." She left the set and walked over to me. "The police are probably already looking for Leslie, but I don't want them to find him now. I want you to find him before they do."

She wasn't quite getting through to me yet. "Let me get this straight." I began.

She interrupted me again. "You see, I called the police station earlier this evening. About six-thirty or seven, when it was getting dark, I started getting—a little frantic. I'd been waiting here, waiting, since noon. Like this. Champagne ready, charcoal in the broiler, steaks marinating. And in my brand-new neglig—"

She cut it off, eyes widening suddenly. "Oh, good grief," she said. "Don't look at me."

"Hmm?"

"I didn't realize—" She looked down at herself, undoubtedly getting a tremendous view from where she was, let out a little gasp and cried, "You must think—" and then scurried into an adjacent room. After a minute or so she

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came back, but wearing a thick, quilted white housecoat.

Her face was as pink as if she'd slapped it several times, but she didn't mention her former semi-nudity again. Instead she continued briskly with what she'd been saying before.

"I phoned the police, partly because I was worried about Leslie, but also to find out if he had actually been released from prison. For all I knew, he might have had to stay there another day for some reason. They were able to tell me he had been released, and when I told them he was supposed to be home but hadn't arrived they said something about my coming in and filling out a—Missing Person report?"

I nodded.

She moistened her lips, frowning slightly. "But that was before the—the shooting, before I heard about it. Don't you understand?"

I thought I did. At six-thirty Leslie was just a hubby who hadn't come home when he was supposed to. But by seven-forty-five he was a man who might have murdered Vincent Blaik.

Consequently I could understand her desire—now—to have the police forget about Leslie entirely. But I got the impression she hoped I could find her husband and, innocent or guilty, keep him from the clutches of the law, hide him out, spirit him to South America or something. Which, of course, I was not about to do.

And I told her so.

She started flapping her arms again.

I said, "Mrs. Moulder, I simply can't work for you on those terms. Only on my terms, which include complete cooperation with the police."

"But—"

"Wait a minute. If your husband is innocent, which we presume him to be, cooperating with the police is actually the best way

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to help prove it. You don't really think he killed Blaik, do you?"

"Of course not. But the police might. After that threat Leslie made against Blaik, and then me like a damned fool phoning them and asking if he'd actually been released from prison—"

"Don't worry about that. The police are a little smarter than most people think. After all, they're the ones who put the crooks in jail. Just in case your husband is guilty, neither the police nor I would help him get away with it. But assuming he's innocent, we'll also do our best to prove it."

She was reluctant still, but she finally agreed I could do it my way. I was hired; we settled my fee; I agreed to keep her informed of anything I learned which might be of importance to her or Leslie whether I managed to find out where he was or not, and then asked her for more details about the original theft, for which Moulder had been sent to the clink.

There wasn't a lot more than I already vaguely remembered. The sum had been an even twenty-eight thousand dollars, not much when compared to the multi-million value of the Hollywood Hills Estates, but a fairly sizeable chunk nonetheless. The money had been taken from the main safe in the hotel office, after the day's receipts, including those from the Skylight Lounge, had been placed in it. Mrs. Moulder admitted that only her husband and Mr. Gordon knew the safe's combination. She didn't even know what it was herself.

"It was brought out in court, I recall, that your husband did need money. Despite the fact that he had maybe two or three hundred thousand here in the development."

She pulled her brows down and her dark eyes got a little colder. "It's true we didn't have a great deal of ready cash, Mr. Scott. We put everything we had or could scrape up into Hollywood Hills. But it's ridiculous to think Leslie would have taken money out of his own safe."

"His, and his partner's."

"Besides, he would have known somebody would surely find out."

"What about your and your husband's investment in the Hollywood Hills? Did Mr. Moulder intend to come back and resume his work here, or what?"

"He was coming back. Everything would be like it was before."

"How come, if Mr. Gordon was convinced your husband stole the money?"

"Oh, that was all settled before Leslie went to prison. And I've talked to Bob a lot about it since then. He feels that even if Leslie did make a—a mistake, it must have been more like borrowing for a little while, not really stealing. Leslie's not a thief. He's an honest, wonderful man! And Bob said when he came back we'd all just try to pretend it never happened."

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"Quite a fellow, this Bob Gordon."

She shrugged. "He really hadn't lost anything, especially since Leslie made restitution, as they called it."

"He gave the money back?"

Her eyes cooled a few degrees again. "He didn't give it back. He never stole it in the first place. But we managed to sell some things, scrape up the money." She wound her fingers together. "He's not only went to prison for something he didn't do, but he had to pay eighteen thousand dollars for the privilege."

Mrs. Moulder sat on the couch, idly twirling a champagne bottle in the warm water in the bucket, while I phoned through to Homicide, and then Samson.

I told him I was officially on the case, working for Mrs. Moulder, and he said, "I suppose she wants you to pursue and capture her husband, assuming six thousand policemen find themselves incapable of coping with the problem."

"Something like that."

"Well, maybe I can help you, Shell. To make up a little for all the favors you've done the department."

"Oh? How?"

"We've got Leslie Moulder down here now, in an 'I' room. He was brought in about ten minutes ago."

"You've found him already?" I said.

Mrs. Moulder stopped twirling the champagne bottle and looked toward me, raising one hand to the hollow of her throat.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Parked half up on a curb in his car, passed out. Still drunk. Bullet hole in the left-rear door of the sedan, by the way."

"I'll be damned," I said. "I guess there's no doubt that he—" I cut it off, realizing Mrs. Moulder was naturally hanging on every word. I finished by saying, "I guess that about wraps it up, then."

"You haven't heard the half of it, Shell. You're at Mrs. Moulder's now?"

"Yeah."

"Well, here's what we've got. We'll send a team out to talk to her, but you can tell her we've got Moulder if you want to."

"What's the rest of it?"

"What is it?" That was Mrs. Moulder, rising to her feet now.

I shook my head at her, listening to Samson.

"Looks like the damn fool must have started drinking right after he got sprung. Nearly empty bottle of bourbon on the car seat. He was out cold, down on the floorboards. Officers who found him had a hell of a time getting him awake. We're pouring strong coffee into him now and trying to make sense of what he says. So far he won't admit he did it.

"No," Sam went on. "We've got enough without it. No gun in the car, but one cartridge case was on the floorboards in back. From a

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forty-five automatic, same as the ones scattered in the lot at the Hideout. SID's doing the comparison now, but they're the same."

"The booze. That could explain the way the slugs were sprayed around."

Sam grunted. "Amount of sauce he must've put away, I'm surprised he didn't hit somebody in the rest room. One other bit, we already had a report on the car."

"Hot?"

"Right, stolen shortly after two. We've got Moulder placed on the plane that got in from San Francisco just before that. He didn't stop at the gate to pay any parking fee, just roared out past the gateman. Man got the registration and reported it to the local police. Well, that's it. You coming down here now?"

"Maybe later. Doesn't seem much reason to now."

"Doesn't, does there? Tell Mrs. Moulder two detectives will be out in about twenty minutes."

"Right. Thanks, Sam." I hung up.

"What is it?" Mrs. Moulder said again, but not with such vehemence this time.

"It's not good," I said. "Maybe you should sit down, Mrs. Moulder."

"I'm all right." Her voice was low, but squeezed tight in her throat. "That was about Leslie, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The police found him in his—that is, a stolen—car. He'd obviously been drinking, and—"

It isn't ever easy to tell a woman her husband has been arrested for murder. Even if she already knows the truth. I fumbled for a cigarette and started to light it, lining up the right words.

"Don't try to spare my feelings, Mr. Scott. At least I know where he is. Anything's better than not knowing. At least I'll be able to see him, talk to him again. I can stand it."

Well, if that was the way she wanted it, okay. Sometimes that's the best way, quick and over with. So I gave it to her. "All right. It's really pretty much open-and-shut. There's been no confession, but the police are convinced he did kill Blaik. There was a cartridge case, from the gun he used, in the car. Mr. Moulder came in on the plane, all right, but apparently he started drinking, stole a car and—well, the police have him in an interrogation room trying to get the story out of him, but he's still so drunk, frankly, they haven't got much out of him. But take it from me, they will. So face it, the simple fact is, Leslie Moulder murdered—"

I was looking right at her from a foot away, and even before I completed my last sentence, or part of a sentence, her eyes changed, lost their brightness; the lids drooped visibly and began instantly to tremble. And then it was as though a huge invisible squeegee started

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moving downward from her head, pressing the blood toward her feet.

Between one second and the next her complexion changed from almost healthy pink to a gray nearly the color of death. Even her throat got a kind of dirty white. Her eyes rolled up. She swayed ever so slightly.

Then she let out one soft sigh and fell, silently, like a bird dead in the air.

She crumpled soundlessly on the carpet at my feet. I wasn't fast enough to catch her. She could stand it, she'd said. Well, she couldn't. Probably I should have known better.

When she came out of the faint in a minute or two, I helped her to the divan. We sat there quietly for another minute, then haltingly she asked a few questions. There wasn't much more to tell her, but I did say a couple of plain-clothes officers would soon be here from Homicide. Just routine, to tell her what she already knew. But she might have a little difficulty getting to see Leslie tonight, assuming she wanted to go down to the police building.

She could speak clearly enough now, though she was still somewhat rocky.

"I want to go, down there," she said. "But I don't think I could bear it tonight. I'm just drained. Oh, poor Leslie. He never could drink worth a damn!" She tried to smile, and almost made it.

"I've seen him pass out sober," she said.

In a little while, after she assured me she was truly all right, I left.

Funny. Shortly after I'd come inside she'd been my client; but she was no longer my client when I left. Quickest case in my career.

Or so I thought then.

4

I STOOD ON the spongy green grass of the fairway for a few seconds, gazing up at the stars. Then I lowered my gaze to the darkened clubhouse on my left, and the pale gleam of lights lining its second story. Behind each of a dozen windows, twice as tall as they were wide, was a blue glow, soft as the dust from a butterfly's wing, the pale blue lights of the Skylight Lounge.

I walked toward it.

It wasn't merely that I felt like having a cool drink, though I did. —But even though Moulder was in the jug and the real work of the case was done, there were questions, little questions, in my mind.

Or maybe it was that something which had begun wiggling in my head shortly after seven-forty-five, had not yet totally stopped . . .

The Skylight Lounge was a membership club—the whole of Hollywood Hills Estates was exclusively for the membership, for that matter. But by producing my

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private investigator's wallet card and holding it casually before me as I walked in, I was admitted without difficulty by an exceptionally strong but not very bright-looking individual clothed in black-satin shirt with high collar buttoned around the neck, Russian style, black-satin trousers, and black shoes curving up and to a point in front, as if he had two small gondolas on his feet.

He was something, all right; but the hat-chick in the small booth beyond him on my right was something else. She looked like a taller, slightly plumper edition of Jazz.

It wasn't exactly a negligee; it was a costume, which, I quickly noted, was echoed on all the other girls in view, meaning one . . . two . . . three other girls. The costumes, of black-satin, were: bra, with bulge of cloth at bottom and bulge of girl at top, bare midriff of girl at midriff, huggy short-shorts appropriately positioned, net stockings, and black high-heeled slippers.

I noted all this on my way to the bar, which was around the corner of the wall and to my left. It was ten stools long, facing the windows I'd been eyeing from the fairway a minute or two ago.

Two couples and a lone man occupied the seats at this end of the bar, so I walked past them and slid on to an empty stool near the other end.

As I sat down, a tall, broad-shouldered bartender in a white jacket with gold piping on the lapels hung up the bar phone and turned. He was a good-looking sonofagun, dark, with black Sultan-in-the-Harem eyes, one of those proddy Latins, I figured.

At the moment, though he appeared to be about half as cracked up as Georgina had been not long ago. He glanced at me, and let his eyes hang on my face for a second, then stepped to the bar and looked past me, as if searching for somebody in the crowded room.

"Bourbon and water," I said, "when you get a chance. If you're up to it."

He turned his head toward me. "Up to it?"

"You look a little rocky. You all right?"

He glanced past me again. "Yeah. I just had some bad news. About a friend of mine."

"Leslie Moulder?"

"Yeah." He stopped and jerked his head to look at me again, more intently this itme. "Who the hell are you? I don't remember seeing you here before. You're not a member."

"Can't I be a guest?"

He scowled but didn't answer. After a moment he said, "What was that crack you made about Leslie Moulder?"

"No crack, just a question. I think I know what the bad news was."

He kept scowling, but said, "I

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guess it isn't a secret. If it is, it won't be for long."

I nodded toward the phone. "That call from the cops?"

He didn't answer for a while. Then he said, "I'm not sure it's your business, mister, but it was from Moulder's wife. I've got to tell a few people we're in for some more sweat." He paused. "Where do you get your information, if you've really got any?"

"Oh, I know he's jugged, all right. I'm a private detective. Fact is, Mrs. Moulder was about to hire me to try locating her husband when we found out he'd been picked up."

He nodded slowly, then smiled kind of half-heartedly and stuck out his hand. "That's different. Sorry if I barked a little. That call kind of shook me. I'm Falcon." He pronounced it Fahlcone. "Rafael Falcon."

"Shell Scott." I shook his hand. "I no more than got hired than Mrs. Moulder fired me. Well, not actually. There just wasn't anything left for me to do." I grinned. "So I thought I'd crash the Lounge for a drink, if there weren't any objections."

"No objections." He flashed me a grin. "Now."

He'd been good looking even when resembling a guy having a severe attack of gall stones, but more relaxed at the moment, and smiling, he was handsome enough to cause normal men to feel life had been unfair to them, and to make estrogenic tomatoes swoon from a distance of ten yards, or possibly even furlongs. Despite the dimness here in the Lounge, his even white teeth looked like cubes of argent neon, and it pained me to note his black hair had more smooth waves in it than four acres of sexy sand dunes.

He was well beyond adolescence, maybe five or six years past my thirty, but he possessed the almost-boyish look of some guys who seem not really to begin aging until they get one foot and three toes in the grave. It was my guess he had a long lusty life ahead of him if he didn't kill himself, in the most probable and enjoyable fashion, in, say, the next year and a half.

Of course, who wants to live forever?

"Bourbon and water, was it?" he said.

"Right. How do I pay for it? Do you use money here, or do I have to produce a gold key or something?"

"Money will do." The drink was already made and he placed it before me. "Excuse me a minute, Mr. Scott."

He ducked under the bar's end and walked to a table against the far wall, leaned over and spoke to a woman with blond hair intricately piled atop her head, then pulled out a chair and sat down.

I carried my drink to the hat-

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check booth and talked to the girl there for a couple minutes.

She was a cute young creature about old enough to vote, with poochy raspberry-colored lips and big crinkly-cornered eyes very bright and shiny, as if she'd just finished laughing till she cried. But she seemed not totally aware of every little thing that went on around her.

Leslie Moulder? Who was he? Any relation to Mrs. Moulder?

Sort of, I said. Didn't Mrs. Moulder act married?

She acted like a boss. She was one of the bosses. How do you *act* married, anyway? She knew some married people, and they didn't act married.

She was Ruthie Barrows, but everyone called her Sweetie, I discovered.

Well, there was one of the other bosses, Mrs. Gordon. Sweetie pointed her out. It was the blonde with hair atop her head, to whom Falcon was still talking. Then there was Rafe, of course. Mr. Falcon. Rafael.

Tell me about Rafe.

He was too good looking. Dreamy. He could dance all the new steps, and even some of the old steps. He'd taught her some of the old steps. They were almost better than the new steps. She'd danced with him? Lots of times; she'd been out with him a couple of times.

But it didn't really mean anything, darn it. Not to him. He went out with all the girls.

All the girls? How about Georgina Moulder?

She wasn't a girl, she was a boss. Maybe Mrs. Gordon?

She was boss, too. Besides, she was married to *Mr.* Gordon. What was the matter with me; was I some kind of buzzard?

I ignored that question, whatever it meant, and asked Sweetie, "How about Lynn Duncan? Her, too?"

She hadn't heard the news.

"Oh, sure," she said with a sigh. "Her more than most, I guess. Especially lately. But Lynn's really a dove."

"Is that good?"

"She's beautiful, simply gorgeous! Haven't you seen her?"

"Yeah, once. For a little while. Big thing between her and Rafe?"

She pooched her lips out a little more. "Right now, I suppose. But

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Rafe—he turns you on, and then he turns you off."

"Is that good?"

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "It is for a little while."

"What's Mr. Gordon like?"

"He's a—"

"I know, he's a boss. Besides that, what's he like?"

"He's gone a lot of the time, so I don't know him too well. But he's nice. Handsome, and tall, and with awfully pretty white hair—" she glanced at my head. "Not like your. But white from—well, he's about fifty or sixty. You know, a hundred years old."

"Ah, then I presume he remains aloof from all the girls, the cocktail waitresses and such."

"A loof?"

"He doesn't creep up behind you, and give you a quick pinch or anything sly like that."

She laughed, delighted. "No, but he's got something in him. Memories, maybe." She laughed some more. "I mean, he gives you that look. Like—" She paused, chewed the side of her lip. "The way you're looking at me, right now."

I wondered if we should carry this conversation any further. It was no way to get the work done.

So I told Sweetie she was a sweetie, and carried my drink away. The ice cubes had melted in it. I imagined Sweetie melted a lot of ice cubes.

I finished my drink and left it on the bar, noting that Rafe was no longer seated with Mrs. Gordon. She was alone at the moment, so I walked over, introduced myself, and asked if I could join her briefly.

She was quite charming.

"Of course, Mr. Scott," she said. "Rafe just finished telling me who you are. I have, of course, heard of you. And some of your exploits."

Mrs. Gordon was in her late thirties, I guessed. Aimed toward forty, but still going uphill and not down. She had the look of a high-fashion model who had quit the racket, stopped crash-dieting, and put some healthy meat on her skeleton. The cheekbones were high and quite prominent, giving her cool blue eyes a slightly Eurasian cast. And it was a sweet, soft mouth, which must have run through a lot more smiles than frowns.

We talked casually for a minute or two. She already knew, from Falcon, about Moulder's arrest. Rafe was bar manager of Hollywood Hills Estates, she told me, and worked the Skylight bar during the week.

Since we were talking about him, I took the opportunity to say, "Rafe's quite a hit with the girls, I gather. I can understand why."

"He is devilishly handsome, isn't he? But he, like nearly all bachelors—you are a bachelor, aren't you, Mr. Scott?—plays the field, as men say."

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"Is that what they say—do? Yes, I'm a bachelor."

"He even made a play for me, at one time," she continued. "Can you imagine that?"

"I can imagine it. You mean since you married Mr. Gordon?"

She smiled. "It could hardly have been before. We've been married for nineteen years, Mr. Scott. And it's a good marriage." She paused. "I told Rafe I was marvelously complimented, but he really should play in his own back yard. He's wonderfully amusing when he wants to be."

"I imagine there must be some husbands who miss the joke. Well, if Rafe doesn't mind jumping fences, I wonder if he ever tried—well, making a play, as you put it, for Mrs. Moulder."

She had been quite frank until that point, but I guess I started overstaying my welcome right then.

Mrs. Gordon chilled.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know anything about that," she said icily. "And even if I did, I'm equally sure it would be none of my business."

She didn't exactly tell me to leave, but the conversation from then on was brisk and without any more of her sweet, soft smiles. I did determine that her husband was once more out of town, as he often was. In San Francisco—he owned the Southbay Apartment complex there. He'd been gone for three days and wouldn't be back until tomorrow. Mrs. Gordon didn't know the slightest thing about Vincent Blaik, except, of course, that he had defended Leslie Moulder.

We talked a little about Leslie, but I learned no more than I already knew or had heard from Georgina, except that, clearly, Mrs. Gordon felt Leslie had been guilty of the theft as charged, justly convicted and sentenced. But she felt no real animus toward him. And he was a murderer now, wasn't he? And one doesn't welcome back murderers, does one?

She had a point. And at that point, I excused myself and removed myself.

Not entirely from the Skylight Lounge, however. Not at first.

The thought had been creeping up on me that I was engaged in an exceptionally fruitless operation, that I was no closer to the meat of the matter than when I'd first come in and cast appreciative eyes upon Ruthie and the other black-satin and net-stocking clad tomatoes here. Thus musing, my thoughts turned to Miss Jasmine Porter.

And so, into the wilds I would go, I continued thinking, and with luck Jazz would still be up and about—it was not yet eleven. If I were persistent enough we might still be able to take up about where we'd left off. I intended to be plenty persistent.

There was a pay-phone in the

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cubbyhole at the end of the bar opposite the club's entrance, so I walked to it, digging change from my pocket. I'd already dropped my dime into the slot when I decided that, before calling Jazz I'd give Samson one last call and get up-to-date. That done, I could turn from the mundane to the ethereal, from digging into death to the pursuit of life, conscience clear and a long lovely night ahead of me.

So I called Sam.

And that is when things began getting gummy.

"Shell," he said, "I tried to reach you but you'd left Mrs. Moulder's."

"I came up to the Skylight Lounge out here, Sam. For a look, and—well, just to nose around a little. How'd the boys do with Georgina?"

"Routine. Rawlins and Kidd went out, gave her the story, asked a few questions. Rawlins tells me she was in pretty bad shape, halfway in shock."

"Yeah, I saw her start coming apart at the seams. True love, I guess."

"Never mind that. We can't get a damn thing out of Moulder."

"You mean he's still too sauced up?"

"Not that.—He's plenty groggy, yeah, but we're keeping his eyes open, at least. I mean he's clammed. Doesn't want a lawyer—in fact, refuses to see one." Sam paused. "You know where that puts us."

"Yeah. Well, he's been in Q a year. You can bet he talked to some of those smart stir-lawyers they've got up there."

"Yeah. I told you on the phone what we've got on this bum. It's a good case."

"Cold, Sam. But you don't need to tell me—"

He told me anyway. "Suppose he absolutely refuses to accept counsel? Tonight, tomorrow, couple days. Then—when he gets into court, he says, 'I didn't know what I was doing. They cursed at me, I got confused. I didn't even have an attorney.' Hell, the court kicks the case out. And we're stuck, can't try him again."

Sam kept going but I only half listened. I'd heart it all before, many times. I couldn't blame Sam, the old war-horse. He'd given most of his life to clean, honest, damned-hard-working law-enforcement, and now he was seeing the edifice built over years, by him and men like him, crumble into chaos, undermined from the top. Cases cold, cut-and-dried, some built up over months by dozens and scores of policemen, some of them caught-in-the-act classics of incontrovertible guilt, were being tossed out of court, either because of U.S. and State Supreme court decisions, by some called whims, or on technicalities, by some called trivialities.

Sam was going on, "next thing, we won't be able to arrest a hood

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unless we've got a lawyer along with us. We don't have to lick the blood off their hands or kiss their feet yet, but who knows when they'll tell us to pucker up?"

I let him run down, then asked him, "Moulder's not saying anything at all?"

"Yeah, he's saying something. The guy's a nut. I think he really is. People talk about stir-crazy. Maybe it's not in the books, but it's real—"

"I know, Sam. What's Moulder saying? He didn't kill Blaik? Is that what he's saying?"

"Hell, he's been saying that ever since he could talk clear enough for us to understand him ten percent of the time. He says he couldn't have killed him, couldn't have killed anybody. He was in a motel all afternoon. Get this—with his wife!"

"With his—Georgina?"

"He's got some more wives?"

"Why the hell would he claim something like that?"

"Will you quit asking stupid questions and get down here right away?"

"You want me to come down now? I was about to call Jazz—"

"Jazz—damn you! Get down here, will you?"

"Sam, if you really want me, if you truly need me—"

"Arrgh. I wish I'd never see you again. He wants you."

"Who?"

"Moulder. Leslie Moulder. The killer, the suspect. Who in hell do you think I have been talking about?"

"Why would Moulder want to see me? I never even met the guy. Are you nuts?"

Silence for several seconds. I'd better watch it, I thought. Sam is big and hard and tough, and usually can bear the weight of mountains. But I could tell. He was experiencing one of his rare, very rare, about-to-flip times. This Moulder must really be a cutey, I thought.

He said, "No, Sheldon, dear boy, I am not nuts. He is nuts, he is a very clever monster." Sam paused again. "Fact is, I think he might be working up to a not guilty by reason of insanity. Whatever he's pulling, you're part of it. He insists on seeing you."

"He insists, huh? It gets cuter. Why does he want to see me, for gosh sakes?"

"He doesn't say." Sam's voice was weary. And no wonder. Ignoring Moulder, I knew he'd been on the job since at least eight this morning. "He just says you're the only one he'll talk to."

"Well, some of us have got it, and some of us—"

"If you're not here in half an hour—"

"I'll be there in twenty minutes, Sam. If I get any tickets, you'll fix them for me, won't you?"

I hung up while he was swearing.

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5

"OKAY, CAPTAIN," I said to Sam as I walked in, "where is the culprit? Lead me to him. I'll show you fuzz how to handle a creep. Where's my billy? Where's my rubber hose? Man, give me that old police brutality!"

Believe it or not, he grinned. He must have recovered somewhat in the twenty-one minutes it had taken me to get here.

"Lovely," he said. "He's all yours. Do you mind if I watch?"

Oh-oh, I thought. This is clearly not going to be a pipe. But I couldn't afford to let Sam see any signs of weakness in me. He had a memory like a Taurean elephant. So I said, "You didn't think I was going to let such a splendid opportunity to infuriate you slip through my fingers, did you?"

He got up and walked around his desk.

"Let me," he said, "lead the way."

On the way he told me what they had got from Moulder so far —what little they'd got. We went into an interrogation room in which stood Sergeant Kidd, whom Sam had mentioned to me earlier, and in which sat in a wooden chair on the other side of the long table, Leslie Moulder.

He was a mess.

It was obvious he'd been quite ill not long before—within recent memory, at least. The police had apparently tried to clean him up but hadn't done a really sanitary job of it.

I couldn't refrain from saying, very softly, to Sam, "Look at the guy. What's got into you? All by itself that's enough for a smart lawyer to get him turned out."

Same spoke in a normal tone. "I keep forgetting you just got here. He declined to let us help him tidy up. We can't force the gentleman, now, can we? He said if we touched him he'd hit us."

I looked at the gentleman. Some gentleman.

I had no clear idea of what Moulder had looked like before doing his time in the state prison, but I did know he was now forty-eight years old. Maybe he'd looked forty-seven when he went in; I didn't know that, either. But he'd come out looking fifty-seven, at least.

He was a tall, lean man with a thin and slightly lop-sided face, very pale, prison-pallor pale, balding, with a fringe of brownish-red hair extending an inch or two up from his ears. The ears were just the right size for his head, if he wanted to hear faint whispers from forty paces; otherwise they were a bit large. His lips were very thick. His eyes were the color of roses, but not nearly as pretty. He did not smell like a rose, either.

One of his front teeth was missing—knocked out by a fellow con at Q, I learned later, too near his

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release date for expert repair unless Moulder wished to stay over for the friendly dentist, which he did not wish to do.

He was a real unpleasant specimen of humanity, and knowing he'd flicked a .45 caliber slug close enough to burn skin from my hand didn't make him look better to me.

"Theeyzz," he said.

I looked at Sam, who looked innocent, but not back at me.

A little later I started to decipher the code. Moulder's missing tooth didn't help, but the main thing was that Moulder was drunk. He was still as drunk and dopey as an alcoholic somnambulist going down for the third time in gremlins. He was staying awake, it seemed, partly because he'd wanted to see me, and partly because the cops kept joggling him to rouse him from approaching stuporousness; but not because he himself thought it a marvelous idea.

"Theeyzz," Moulder said. "Yazr, izzim."

"Well, I couldn't understand it all until a minute or two later, but by thinking back to how it had begun I was able to put almost the entire sequence together. It would be futile to report the weird dialogue either verbatim or as it buzzed on the ear. Let it be enough to say his last comment had been, "There he is. Yes, sir. That's him."

Even allowing for the tooth and lips and booze and possible dementia, the statement rang a bit oddly, because he was looking straight at me when he said, as though to several other people, "There he is."

"You're Scott, right? Couldn't be anybody else. You're Scott?"

"That's right. What'd you want to see me about, Moulder?"

"You got shot at tonight. Right? That's what the fuzz tell me. They act like I'm supposed to know it."

"Yeah, I got shot at."

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His voice actually got a little more distinct when he next spoke. He leaned forward and fixed the rosy eyes on me and said, "You see who it was shot at you? See anything, anything at all?"

It gave me a definite ripple and chill over all the vertebrae of my spine. It was the same question, in almost the same words, that his wife had asked me. What the hell was this?

I hesitated, then said, "No."

"Nothing?"

"Only the car. And not much of that."

He said a foul four-letter word. Then, "Go way." He had withdrawn his attention from me. His eyes were closed now. His puffed lips flapped gently, as if he was beginning to work up a snore.

"Hey," I said sharply.

His wrinkled lids slid up like puffy Venetian blinds.

"Yeah?"

"Is that all, Moulder? I thought you wanted to see me."

"I've seen you." I was dismissed.

Maybe that's what he thought. But right then the insolence of him, and the sight and smell of him rose in my gorge.

"Listen, saphead," I said. "Keep those goddamn glimmers open and—"

He bounced a little on his chair, maybe an eighth of an inch, when he heard the entirely different tone of my voice. But Sam had a hand on my arm.

"Can it," he said. "I know it's a world we never made as they say, tiger, but—"

"Can it yourself, Sam. I'm not a cop. No police brutality here, just one dumb private citizen talking to another. Okay?"

"Just take it easy."

"I won't lay a hand on him. But he asked for me, didn't he? Okay, he's got me."

Sam raised one shoulder an inch, let it drop.

I stepped closer to the table, put my hands flat on its top, and bent over it toward Moulder. I stuck my face about two inches from his, and since I have been told it is a face which, when I am not myself amused, is not an exceptionally amusing congregation of features to behold—his glimmers were open wide now.

The reek of him oozed into my nostrils and burned. But I kept looking down at him and said, "Moulder. Leslie Moulder, you hear me; they could hear me in the Homicide squadroom. "If you can't, sweetheart, start shoveling the moss out of your ears, because you're going to be listening for a while, and my words may pound dingleberries clear into your biscuit."

It wouldn't happen again, most likely, but for those few seconds he was almost hypnotized, blood-stained eyes fixed on the bridge of my nose.

I cut the two inches between

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our chops to one and gave him a half minute of words, then finished it up with, "So we're friends now, right? Friend. And we're going to have a friendly conversation."

Well, in a way we did.

Moulder didn't dummy up on me again, but his cooperation wasn't a hell of a lot of help. As I've indicated, it took about twenty-five minutes to decipher and interpret a five-minute dialogue. At first I wondered how the guy could still be so plastered after all this time, but then I realized it hadn't been time, only my sense of time. He hadn't really been in the can long at all.

When I'd talked to Samson from Mrs. Moulder's he told me they'd had Leslie for about ten minutes. Add half an hour for me with Georgina and in the Skylight Lounge, a shade over twenty minutes to reach the police building, plus about another ten minutes till now. Moulder had been in custody for only a little more than an hour.

At any rate, the friendly conversation—deciphered, and with obscenities diminished, went about like this.

"Now we're such good friends, Moulder, tell me why you tossed those friendly pills at me."

"I didn't shoot at anybody."

"Where were you about quarter of eight tonight?"

"With my wife."

"Georgina?"

"Georgina."

"At quarter to eight?"

"Well, sure. All the time. All day. All night.

"Sure. Even last night."

"Tonight. This afternoon. All the time."

"Chop it, Moulder. I already know you've admitted not remembering a damn thing for hours, not even driving the heap you stole. You remember driving the car now?"

"No. I—how could I remember? I was asleep."

"You were passed out, yeah."

"Passed out, asleep, what difference? I wasn't even in a car."

"The fuzz found you in the car."

"That's what you tell me. I don't remember it. Just the police car."

"Yeah. You were with your wife forever. Where?"

"Motel."

"A motel. With your wife. You can do better than that."

"She met me at the airport. We went to a motel."

"Why? Why not to your own home?"

"Georgina wanted it like a picnic. I mean, a vacation. Where nobody'd know we were there and bust in on us."

"Sure. Tell me about it."

"Well, that's it. I was with her. We drank a lot. Drank. I'd been inside for a year, no drinks. Hit me harder than I thought it would."

"Uh-huh. So?"

"I fell asleep, that's all. There

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in the motel. I didn't kill anybody."

"Of course not. You didn't threaten to kill Blaik when you fell from here, either."

"So I threatened. What's threatened? That was just—he got me bugged up."

"Looks like you got more bugged up in stir, Moulder."

"No, I let it go out of my mind. But the bastard sold me down the river. He didn't have to lose the case. He wouldn't even put me on the stand. Make him tell, give him a lie test or something and it'll prove—"

"You conveniently forget a lot of things. Like he's dead."

He blinked slowly and moistened his fat dry lips. "That's right. I did forget. Well, it's a mess."

"Did killing him slip your mind before or after you killed him?"

"It didn't happen."

"Nothing happened. Nothing at all. You drank with your wife, had a couple too many, and now you can't remember a thing. Everything went black. And while everything was black you of course did not drive around and kill Blaik and maybe let fly a few at me . . ." I stopped. Nobody had been shooting at me. I'd gone over that in my thoughts with some care already.

So I continued, "Skip the shooting at me. Make it shooting at Blaik—and Lynn."

"Who?"

"Lynn Duncan."

"Who's she?"

"You never heard of her."

"Never heard of her."

"Don't tell me the police haven't mentioned her name to you, Moulder."

"I—yes. Think they did. Don't really remember. But I don't know who she is."

"Where's this dandy motel you stayed in?"

"I, hell, I don't remember. Somewhere near Hollywood. I was a little drunk when we got there."

"Forgot that, too, huh? You've got a damned good forgetter. Even forgot your wife was home all afternoon, waiting for you to show. Slinky and frilly, rouged and perfumed and lipsticked, in a brand-new negligee, waiting for hubby."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"She was with me. In the motel. Drank and drank."

And that's the way it went.

Back in Samson's office he sat behind his desk and I straddled a wooden chair and leaned on its back. Sam said, "You did very well. You got almost as much nothing out of the man as we did."

He got out his stinking black cigar. And a match.

Well, I couldn't have that.

If I have not before this made it clear, it should be emphasized that Sam and I wage a continual war. It is the friendliest war imaginable, almost bloodless—the captain of Central Homicide, L.A.P.D., versus one L.A. private

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eye—a kind of adult foolishness which adds zest to our joustings. And, maybe more important, often makes each of us reach farther than otherwise we would. And you never grab anything you believe beyond your reach.

So I reached. I went out on a limb. But it was, I felt, a sturdy limb; and the more I thought about it the more I began to believe I might not be on a limb at all but standing firmly on fact.

"Sam," I said, making my voice as unctuously patronizing as I could, "your trouble is that you're bound—hidebound—by routine, the book, stupifying convention. Actually, you were listening with your ears instead of your liver."

"Liver, huh?" he said, wearing his long-suffering expression.

"Yes, liver. Very important. And since I have a most liverish liver, I learned quite a lot from the interrogation of Leslie Moulder re the murder of Vincent Blaik."

"How nice," he said. "Like what?"

"Like he didn't do it."

"Of course, you can prove it."

"Well, um, not this instant." I paused. "But I'll tell you how we can prove it."

6

FOUR OF US walked down the hospital corridor, headed for room 411, in which lay abed Lynn Duncan, under some sedation and

with her head somewhat ravaged, but alive, recuperating, and even conscious. Conscious enough to talk if she wanted to; and we had the doctors' okay for a brief talk with her, if Lynn didn't object too strenuously. I didn't think she would.

The four of us were: Samson, Sergeant Kidd, Leslie Moulder, and me. Half an hour had passed since I'd told Sam what I wanted to do, whereupon he'd thought a while, put away his wooden match, clamped the cigar in his teeth, and started making arrangements.

Arrangements, including the timing, had now been completed. I glanced at my watch. Eleven-

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thirty on the tick. We could hear the girl's voice coming faint from inside 411 as we approached the door.

When we stopped outside it the words were clear, "I did it for Leslie! I've told you and told you, I did it for Leslie!"

Sam opened the door and we went in. Me, first, so I could turn and keep an eye on Moulder. Then Moulder with Kidd, followed by Samson.

Lynn Duncan sat propped up against pillows behind her on the bed, naturally looking toward us as we entered. A uniformed officer and a doctor stood near her before a white folding hospital screen.

Moulder looked at Lynn. She looked at him. Moulder looked at me, Kidd, Samson, back at Lynn again.

The first one to speak was Lynn. She looked at me and said quietly, "Hello, Shell."

Big deal. Big nothing. That was fine.

"Hi, Lynn," I said.

Sam took over, threw a few fast questions at Moulder, a couple at Lynn. Only half-heartedly. I think he was just about convinced. Then he nodded at Kidd and the sergeant took Moulder away. Back to the cell block this time.

The policewoman, who'd been behind the screen crying, "I did it for Leslie," came out, spoke to Samson, and left. The rest was my baby, so I sat down on a wooden chair by the bed close to Lynn Duncan.

"This won't take long," I said to her. "Mostly, you'll just have to listen, maybe answer a couple of questions. Right?"

"All right." She looked scared. But it had been quite a night for Lynn. She had plenty to be scared about.

I said, "Let's go back to when we met tonight, Lynn. At the Hideout. After we joined you and Blaik, I was looking out the window and saw a car come up the road, but it didn't continue on to the entrance. The driver pulled into the lot. That was a little before seven-forty-five. A little before the shooting. Get that clear. He just came up, parked, and waited there. Got it?"

"Yes." Very soft.

"When we all went out, it was just about quarter of eight. You didn't want to leave right then, remember? You wanted to stay."

She didn't say anything.

I went on, "Then the shooting. Blaik was farthest from the club's steps and I was a few feet from him, moving toward him. Jazz was behind me on my right. More important, you were over my left, about the same distance from the steps as Jazz was. So you were a long way from Blaik, a long way. Clear?"

She moistened her lips, and swallowed. She moved one hand

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from her side and let it rest on her left breast. "I remember now. Yes, I was."

"Uh-huh. One final thing. The killer had plenty of time to aim that first shot. He was ready, and waiting; he'd started the car's engine. So, first one shot, then a short pause—call it the time required for a man in a hurry to aim again in a hurry—and the second shot. Another brief pause, and then three or four shots all at once, the guy yanking, not squeezing, the trigger for those last ones. But we know he aimed at least two, maybe three of those shots, with some care."

I paused. "I realize you haven't had much time to think about these things since it happened, Lynn. Maybe just during the last half hour or so. But if you hadn't already figured it out for yourself, are you starting to get the picture now?"

She didn't speak, but I saw her Adam's apple move as she swallowed again.

"Remember where you were? Put it this way: draw a line on the ground from the car to you, and I was standing just about on that line. A man shooting at me might miss and hit you by accident. Only that's not what happened. Instead, a man shooting at you came close to hitting me. A man taking time to aim, wanting to be sure he hit you, killed you. Want to tell us about it now, Lynn?"

"Tell what? I don't know what you mean."

I sighed. "Okay. Here's a little more. Some of us, for a while, thought those slugs might have been sprayed all over the landscape because the gunman was drunk. But the gunman wasn't drunk. He was cold sober. He shot and killed Blaik. And he intended to kill Blaik, not me. He knew Blaik was at the Hideout, knew the where and at least approximately the when."

I got out cigarettes, looked at the doctor, who nodded. Then I lit a smoke and had a long drag before continuing. "Blaik wasn't tailed to the Hideout; the killer didn't arrive until shortly before we all left, and you and Vince must have been there for at least an hour then. If we wanted to grab at straws we could say maybe a waiter or guest at the restaurant called the gunman and said Blaik was there, to come over and kill him, but I think we can ignore that little beauty. So what's left? Well, we know, don't we?"

I paused and looked at her. She stared straight back at me, silently, those moist, wide-set eyes, eyes the shade of bruised mint leaves, unwavering on my own. But now the hand resting on her breast rose and fell more rapidly, testimony to her accelerated breathing. Her hand rose and fell, rose and fell, on her sweet young breast.

I felt a little sorry for Lynn, just

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a little. She was so young and scared. And such a damned fool.

"There's only one thing left, since Blaik himself hadn't known where he was going for dinner, hadn't known in advance that he was going to take you to the Hide-out. That, dear, was your idea. He told me, while you and Jazz were in the john, that you'd suggested the place. Which explains how the killer knew where Blaik would be and approximately when he'd be leaving. Because, you set him up, or at least, helped with part of the set-up. Because, Lynn, the killer asked you, or told you, to make sure Blaik took you to the Hide-out."

Her hand stopped moving as she held her breath. I counted the seconds. One, two, three, four; then the sudden movement again, more rapid even than before.

"We don't need to go into what you told Blaik to arrange for the meeting in the first place. That's not important, it could have been almost anything. We needn't even wonder, right now, about what Mr. —call him the killer—told you, or promised you that made you willing to take a man to a remote, carefully selected spot where he could be murdered."

I paused. "Hell, Lynn, I'll give you this—there's a good chance you didn't think Blaik would be killed, maybe didn't even think he'd be hurt. But I know for damn sure you didn't think you were supposed to be murdered right along with him."

"That's crazy. It's all crazy. You don't make any sense, not any."

"Come on. Why do you think we brought Moulder in here and had a policewoman pretending to be you spilling your guts? Whoever tried to kill you must have heard by now that he only wounded you, but he's hoping you won't pull through, that you'll still die. You can bet on it. Because he knows as long as you're alive you might start spilling. Moulder didn't react and neither did you—hell, you're strangers; you were still living in Florida when he was sent up.

"But you can take my word for it, when the real killer walks through that door he'll be sweating blood, or you will, one of you or both of you. And the harder you try to keep it from showing the more it'll show."

"Stop it; you're crazy! What are you trying to do to me?" Lynn's eyes rolled from side to side. "My head. Oh, my head—"

I got to my feet.

"You're lucky your head's just banged up, baby. I've seen men—women, too, if you're interested—after a forty-five slug slammed into their skulls. It's like setting off a little dynamite inside the brain, really like an explosion. That old gray matter isn't gray, it's quite colorful, even pinks and whites, and there's more wet blood in it than you'd suppose—"

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"Stop it!"

I raised my voice, let the words come out faster. "Look, you know he tried to kill you. It wasn't a drunk. You know that more than the rest of us do, Lynn. He was taking dead aim, as carefully as he could in the cramped time he had. You were clear the hell out of the line of fire, if Blaik was the only target.

"He couldn't leave you alive to tell us why you did it, to tell us his name. You know he killed Blaik. And you know he tried to kill you. He sure meant to kill you. So now it's your turn, Lynn. Tell us who it was; tell us his name."

For a few moments I thought it had worked. It hadn't.

I knew she must have other reasons for not wanting to spill, but little Lynn certainly was also aware that telling us the tale would make her part of it, make her, in the dry phrase, "accessory before the fact" of murder.

She did react, though. It was quite a reaction. She sat straight up in bed, her back leaving the pillows, flinging an arm out, fingers clawing the air. She waggled that one claw-fingered hand back and forth as if she were rattling a doorknob, while crying, "No! I can't stand it! No! No—" And then she fainted.

Some faint. She must have seen a movie where the Doctor says, "That's a bad cough, lady, no more smokes for you." It was a far, far cry from the true, authentic, no-

way-to-say-it faint, the honest-to-goodness faint, of Mrs. Moulder.

Lynn merely let her last word trail off in a kind of cooing oo-*aaa,* like a quail calling across a canyon, then flopped back onto the pillows. There was still color in her cheeks. She was breathing pretty well. But she must have figured she had to do something.

If I knew it was a fake faint, surely the doctor did too. But he said, "I think that's enough for now."

Sam opened the door for me, bowing and sweeping his arm toward the hall like a lowly vassal, but I ignored him, stepped to the door and dropped the last small bomb of this particular raid.

"All right, doctor. For now. But we'll be back—with the next guy."

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There was no visible indication that the bomb had hit its target. Lynn didn't twitch, or go oo-*aaa.* She lay as one dead.

But I knew very well the little dear was listening.

7

IN THE HALLWAY I said to Samson, "How long do you think it'll take to get word back from San Francisco on Robert Gordon."

"If he's there—and has been there all the time, no conspicuous absences, that is—word might be waiting at the office right now. If not, who knows? Two, three hours more, maybe a day."

"Actually, I don't think it's too important. But there's no point in leaving it dangling. Everything set?"

"All set."

"Okay. See you later, Sam."

It was fifteen minutes after midnight when I phoned Mrs. Georgina Moulder. She answered right away, so either she had a phone by the bed, or hadn't been in bed. Anyway, she didn't sound sleepy.

"Mrs. Moulder?" I said. "Hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, I—simply can't sleep. Not after all that's happened."

I'll bet, I thought.

"Is this Mr. Scott?"

"Yeah, Shell Scott."

Her voice grew a bit thinner. "Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? I should say not. Everything's wonderful! I've got wonderful news!"

"Oh? What is it, Mr. Scott?"

"You know the police hauled Mr. Moulder in, arrested him for Vincent Blaik's murder. But what you don't know is that your husband didn't do it."

I wish I could have seen her face. There was an unduly prolonged silence.

Finally she said, "Why, that's unbelievably good news. I can hardly believe it, although of course I knew he didn't do it. I just knew it. But are you absolutely certain?"

"Well, not absolutely. But I will be before long."

"How do you mean?"

"It's clear that Mr. Moulder didn't do the shooting. But we're not sure yet who did. There's another man involved, apparently. Somebody who killed Blaik, at any rate. We're working on that angle now. When I say we, I mean the police and me. I know I haven't been working for you, at least not officially. But I simply had to tell you the splendid news myself."

Short silence this time. "Yes, it's so good of you, Mr. Scott. I'll be able to sleep now."

"Well, then, I'll leave you to pleasant dr—"

"Mr. Scott, don't hang up!"

"No, I'm here."

"This is such fantastic—I'm so happy. But this has been such a trying day, waiting and waiting for Leslie, you know."

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"I know."

"And I still don't know where he was. Why didn't he come home to me?"

"Oh, he got drunk. He's still drunk, if you don't mind my saying so. He even tried—this would probably amuse you, Mrs. Moulder, if it wasn't such a serious matter—he tried to tell us he was with you. In a motel of all things. Of course, we slapped that out of him. Incidentally, while staggering drunk, he fell and injured his face slightly. And his arms and legs. But it's nothing serious."

"Just so he's alive and can come home to me."

"He probably won't be released until morning. Considering his condition, you understand."

"I'll be waiting for him."

I smiled, shaking my head. Words, they can mean so many things.

"I wonder where Leslie was all afternoon," Mrs. Moulder said. "Do you know?"

"Frankly, we never did find out precisely. But, since we know he didn't do the shooting, his whereabouts is of little moment now. As long as he didn't commit a crime, the police have no interest—"

"You still haven't told me how you—the police—know it wasn't Leslie."

"Oh, that. Simple, really." I hated to tell another lie. But I was going to have to do it.

"You may or may not know, Mrs. Moulder, that the Los Angeles Police Department is one of the finest organizations of its kind in the world. Moreover it has a criminalistics department second to none. In SID—that's the Scientific Investigations Division in the police building downtown, they have instruments so up-to-date they haven't even been invented yet—ah, that is, most people don't know they've been invented.

"To make a long story short, by certain scientific techniques and processes, involving X-rays, quantitative diffraction, and molecular precipitation, SID has been able to prove conclusively that, for at least a week past, Leslie Moulder, your husband, was never closer than two metres to the locus of a gunpowder explosion, such as that required to propel a bullet from the muzzle of a gun."

"Two metres," she mused. "How far is that?"

Actually, I wasn't sure myself.

"Quite a ways," I said. "The vital fact is that Leslie could not possibly have held a pistol in his hand and fired it. In fact, he hasn't been within two metres of anybody who did fire a pistol."

"I see. Like the new paraffin test to find out if someone shot off a gun?"

"Ho-ho," I hoed, "that's for writers of fiction, and old wives who tell tales." I liked that. "You can merely wear gloves and foil the so-called paraffin test. We're much

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beyond that now." I paused. "Incidentally, this is still supposed to be secret, Mrs. Moulder. I've permission to tell you this much, but no more."

"Mr. Scott, I'm so—so excited, I know I won't be able to sleep. You must come out and tell me everything. I simply must know all about Leslie."

"Now? But it's so late. It's after midnight."

"To me, it's—I feel it's the dawn of a new day."

"Yes, I guess it is, at that."

"Please come."

"I'll be there as fast as I can, Mrs. Moulder.

"Call me Georgina." she said.

8

WHEN GEORGINA opened the door I won another bet with myself. I had figured it was at least ten to one she'd still be wearing her brand-new negligee. She was. I think she'd also turned on three or four more lights inside the house, including some of those real hot kinds. There was a hell of a lot more illumination than she'd got from her TV set, that was certain.

She stood aside in the doorway, just enough so I had to brush rather vigorously against her to get through, but I managed to get in.

She closed the door, took my hand and pulled me to the low divan. The colorful flowers were still in the same places, but looking a little wilted now. That's life; inevitably the bloom fades. The silver bucket was on the table where it had been before, in it the bottle of champagne. And I noticed, not with astonishment, that there was fresh ice in the bucket.

Mrs. Moulder—Georgina to me—got me seated, then leaned back against some throw-pillows at the divan's end, and crossed her legs. Damn good legs, I had to admit it. In fact, practically everything I could see on and about Mrs. Moulder was first-class, and that included practically everything on and about Mrs. Moulder.

It became evident to me that I'd not quite won my bet with myself, after all. Georgina was in sheer negligee and peignoir, but it wasn't the same outfit in which she'd greeted me before. That had been blue; this one was pale lavender. It looked even thinner than the blue one. Yes, no doubt about it. Lots thinner.

"Now, Shell, tell me—" she began.

This had taken enough time already, so I interrupted her, "You've got an exceptionally fine body, Mrs. Moulder," I said.

"Call me Georgina—What?" She blinked, then smiled, almost drippingly. "Not that I really mind, but you are quite blunt, aren't you?"

"You haven't heard anything yet."

Maybe she really was a highly

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intuitive tomato. Not quite intuitive enough, of course, because I think she knew right then, that the jig was up. But she wasn't going to let me guess that, no sir.

I said, "It is a fine, a very lovely body, Georgina. I hate to think of it shriveling up like a sea anemone in—"

"Shriveling?"

"Yeah. Getting dry and droopy, less fire and more ashes. But it happens. The bloom fades. Why, I've seen gals come out of Tehachapi after only half a dozen years—"

"Tehachapi. Isn't Tehachapi a prison?"

"—looking like they'd been there since the Coolidge Administration. Looking like Coolidge. Yeah, Tehachapi's a prison. But, damn it, you and your lover shouldn't have tried to stab Leslie the second time. You'll have to tell me part of how you rigged that twenty-eight-G dandy and stuck Leslie with it in the beginning, but you will, Georgina. The idea of Leslie's heisting cash from the development of which he was co-owner might not have been strong enough that you could be sure he'd go to the jug, so you must have enlisted Blaik somehow, for insurance.

"I suppose you had something on him, or got something, or maybe just paid him off. That'll keep. But I can tell you the finish of the Blaik caper. That's enough by itself, and it's wrapped up."

She laughed. "This is preposterous. What in the world are you talking about?"

"You and Lover, what else? I suppose it was the same old story, Adam and Eve and them big apples, but however it started, Georgina, it is now ended."

"You must be ill. I—I'm going to call the police."

I grinned, for two or three reasons, and said, "Let me finish first, will you? There's more. Some of it will interest you. Some of it will really interest you."

"Well, all right. Try me."

She had assumed a most perplexing posture for one presumably relaxing. I looked at her, then turned to peek at the partly-open door of the bedroom. The bedroom, in which was a fine bouncy bed, of which, it could be assumed, I was supposed to be thinking.

But I was thinking of the guy

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there. I knew there must be one guy in there, maybe two.

I turned my head back toward her, saying, "I guess I'm all business tonight, Mrs. Moulder. First, I really should apologize for lying to you on the phone a little while ago. But you lied quite a lot to me today." I got out cigarettes. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead and smoke." She wasn't exactly smiling drippingly any more.

I had a puff. "In fact," I went on, "that's one of the things—but only one—that cinched the affair. You told me one story and your hubby told me another. Unless you were in some kind of nutty cahoots to beat the rap or set up some kind of plea, one of you was lying. If you were telling the truth, Leslie of course was lying. But if Leslie's tale was true, it was vice versa. And the vice versa became increasingly interesting."

"Have you got anything important to say? None of this is interesting to me yet."

"I'll be more specific. The fact is that Leslie told the truth. You did meet him: you did take him to a 'vacation' motel. Which one isn't important. There you dallied, and drank—and drank, and drank.

"You called the Hollywood police at six-thirty P.M., knowing the kill of Blaik was set for seven-forty-five or eight, so the name Leslie Moulder and the fact of his release from prison would be fresh in the official mind when word came in about Blaik's murder. Georgina, am I boring you?"

She didn't say anything. But she didn't look bored.

"Understand, during none of this time were you home waiting for your big moment. You were in the motel with your increasingly stewed husband. You couldn't go home and scoot inside until after dark, not merely to avoid being seen, but because Blaik wouldn't be dead until then. Until a quarter of eight, as it turned out. A friend of mine named Samson tried to reach you at about eight but had no luck until eight-thirty. By then you and Lover had met, put Leslie's frazzled form in the murder car, planted the cartridge case and such, and scooted your separate ways—leaving Leslie to be found, and the sooner the better.

"That, of course, depended on making sure the police were looking for him. Which was part of your reason for calling me, Georgina, after you heard my name on the news programs, just in case the Missing-Person bit didn't do the job all by itself."

I stopped, looking down at the table before us. "I hope I'm not out of line, Georgina, but were you planning to drink this champagne?"

The word she said wasn't a very thrilling one. Maybe Leslie had picked up some of his lingo at home, before going off to college.

"Well, you don't have to bite my

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head off," I said. "You were much nicer this afternoon. But this afternoon, of course, you wanted to know if I'd gotten a look, any kind of a look, at—Lover. That was vital, I wasn't supposed to be—"

"Quit calling him Lover!"

"Not quite yet. I will, at the right time." I smiled. "I'm funny, I have a certain delicacy of feeling about how things should be—"

"You clown! Say the rest of it!"

"Okay." I dropped the light tone. "It's murder, and it's murder one. And more. Murder in fact, accomplished; murder attempted, and missed; and conspiracy to commit murder. There's a hint of what's coming. Interested now, Georgina?

"Back to Leslie. Oddly, he asked me the very same question you did if I'd seen the gunman. But for an exactly opposite reason. He hoped I had got a glimpse of the man, because then I might know it hadn't been him. His drunken story was true. When I started wondering about that I wondered about something else.

"I couldn't understand why you and your co-killer would take a chance somebody might believe Leslie's story, even crazy as it sounded, and drunk as he was, plus no alibi, fat motive, public threat to kill Blaik and the rest of it. That puzzled me, however, only until I realized you wouldn't have taken that chance. Not the way you'd planned everything else. When the cops found poor Leslie he was supposed to be dead."

"You're a liar!"

"Not any more. That was only on the phone. I rarely—"

She called me a couple of unthrilling names.

I said flatly, "He was supposed to die, supposed to be dead when the police found him. I'm not guessing, Georgina. I don't know yet whether you fed him some kind of poison or sleeping pills in his drinks, or just poured more booze down him after he passed out—SID can check that out—but I know you thought Leslie was dead. Funny thing, he would have been except that after you left him the police fed him enough coffee to save his life."

"That's ridiculous. Even if it were true, you'd just be guessing—"

"I'm not guessing. Georgina, you're going to hate yourself, but I knew, *knew* for sure, that Leslie was set up for the second murder—the third if Lynn hadn't been missed—and that you knew it, you were in on the planning of it, you in fact thought Leslie was dead, the very moment I remembered something that you, yourself, told me."

She was interested enough now. But all she said was, "Go on."

"Well, you keeled over in a faint earlier this evening, you recall. More recently another lady pulled a fake faint on me, but yours was the real thing. You really

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fainted. And the interesting thing, Georgina, is that it was something you not only hadn't planned, but that you couldn't possibly have prevented." I pulled the last drag from my cigarette and stubbed it out in an ashtray.

"And that's what cooked your goose. Murder will out, and all that, I suppose."

"You aren't making any sense with this yet."

"I will. Let me set the stage, Georgina. Me on the phone, you twirling a prop champagne bottle, listening, oh how carefully listening. Waiting for Leslie to be found, hoping, hoping he'd been found. And on the phone to Samson I said, 'you've found him already?' or something like that. Even in the middle of your act—'What *is* it?'—and all that, you must have been dancing inside. It was working beautifully, exactly according to plan—even better, dumb old Shell Scott was right by your side to help out, proof of the widow's devotion."

I grinned at Georgina. "Yeah, widow's the word. But, to continue. You knew I was talking to the law, you heard me mention there'd been no confession, heard my end of the conversation. All of it fitted the picture in your mind of a dead man found in a parked car. Then you let me tell you the police had found Leslie. In a stolen car. That he'd been drinking. The case was open-and-shut the police were convinced you husband had killed Blaik."

I looked at her appraisingly. She was interested, intensely interested, but that was all. No real reaction yet. "You don't get it yet, do you? Up till then, Georgina, you'd been a woman of steel, but still a woman. Facing tragedy bravely and unafraid. There was still a glow of color in your cheeks—by golly, probably you did slap your face in the bedroom—and your eyes were bright. You wanted me to tell you everything, not spare your feelings.

"Well, I didn't. I gave you some odds and ends, explained that the police had Leslie in an interrogation room, that he hadn't confessed yet but would. And I wound it up by saying something to the effect that sure as hell Leslie Moulder had murdered Blaik. At least I started to say it. But by then you were on your way; you were gone."

Comprehension was beginning to dawn, slowly, in her eyes.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Here your world was crashing about your head. Beloved husband was indeed a killer; he'd been caught, only a day out of prison and here he was on his way back—and for murder this time. Still, you stood up to all that. You didn't come apart at the seams, didn't feel the hellish shock that stunned you and drained the blood from your face and sent you into that faint until the moment when you suddenly realized your husband wasn't dead."

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Georgina looked a bit fishy around the gills right then.

But she was silent for only a second or two. Then she cried out, in quite a loud voice, "All right!"

It was pretty loud if she was talking to me. But I didn't really think she was talking to me. She wasn't.

He came out of the bedroom. I'd had that figured, too, fortunately. The room he'd probably be in, I mean. It's a good thing I feel there's a time and place for everything, and despite Georgina's implicit, and even explicit, invitations, had not felt that this was either the place or the time.

Anyway, handsome, pretty-toothed Rafael Falcon came out of the bedroom, with a .45 caliber Colt automatic in one brown hand, and at last I felt, for this at least, it was the time.

"Hi, Lover," I said.

"Up," he said, very nasty. "Get 'em up."

"Oh, come on. You can't go around knocking off everybody who peeves you, Rafe. You'll run out of bullets."

He got a certain look on his face, and without even examining it closely I decided to do what he'd said.

I climbed to my feet and raised my hands over my head.

"Take it easy," I told him. "A bottle of booze—or pills, or whatever you stuffed into Leslie so he wouldn't wake up again—that's one thing. It doesn't make any noise. But if you set that banger off there'll be eighteen people charging in here from all over the fairways, not to mention cops—"

"Shut up."

"Look, you've had it. Lynn's still alive and sure to spill soon—"

"If I have to, I'll kill you, Scott. Noise or no noise."

"I suppose you would, at that. Just think about it a little, will you? Keep thinking about it, while I finish what I was saying. I was about to tell you that cops would also bust in here. Cops, fuzz, police officers—"

Everybody I'd run into lately was foul-mouthed as could be. What was happening to civilization? Or maybe it was just the people I'd run into. At any rate, Rafael Falcon was the most accomplished curser of them all, apparently in English, Spanish, and what sounded like Norwegian.

I really did wish he'd let me finish, because I was more than a little worried, to tell the truth. As I'd told Lynn, I have seen skulls hit by .45's flung open as though exploded, and he was holding the big automatic steady on my head.

"Rafe—Mr. Falcon," I said. "Easy. You probably won't believe this, and I guess I wouldn't blame you, but it's the truth. The captain of the L.A.P.D. Homicide Division is somewhere behind you there in that bedroom. I can't see him, but I know damn well he's there—he's

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been in there all the time."

He was off again.

I looked at Georgina, and I said it as fast as I could, "Will you calm this creep of yours down? You didn't realize it until I got here, but on the phone I was giving you a lot of jazz. I knew then what I was going to do and going to say to you, and you should sure as hell realize it now.

"Do you think I'd have come alone, knowing that, and knowing you'd call Rafe over here as soon as I hung up?"

Rafe was listening, too, but it was obvious he didn't believe a word of my fantasy. Georgina, though, wasn't so sure. "You couldn't have known it was Rafe," she said.

"The hell I couldn't. Not to mention Lynn Duncan and a couple of other items, you phoned him, *bing,* the last time I left here. He'd just finished taking the call when I went into the Skylight Lounge. Sure, you're both pretty good actors, and Rafe didn't do badly ad-lib when he lamped me sitting at the bar behind him. But he still told me too much, more than he should have spilled to any stranger, even though he might have thought I'd heard part of his conversation with you. Of course, I wasn't exactly a stranger by then, was I?"

"That's enough, you—" Rafe said, followed by some of the English and Norwegian. "Out the front door. Georgina, kill some of the lights."

"Wait a minute." I looked at Falcon, facing him, and the gun was more ugly to me than you might believe, but I didn't move. If I moved, Rafe would follow me, and I wanted him to stay where he was, with those wide shoulders almost filling the doorway of the bedroom right behind him.

"Sam," I said, not softly. "Sam. What the hell, man! Move, will you? Do something!"

Rafe leaned forward, peeling his lips back and sticking the gun out a little farther. I wasn't sure, but he acted like he was going to shoot me.

"Rafe, there's something you've simply got to believe, for both our sakes. I swear, Sam's somewhere in there behind you. Phil Samson himself, the old fuddy-duddy of Homicide. He's there."

I wasn't certain that Rafe was quite sane. His lips were going in and out from both sides and he was getting an expression in his eyes that I didn't like at all.

"Rafe," I said. "Old buddy. Mr. Falcon. The hell with that damned fuddy-duddy in there. Why didn't I think of this before? I'll go outside with you, sure. I'll go outside and watch you get your brisket shot off. Rafe, watch it! I didn't mean it. Well, yes I did, but—ah, why do I have to be so confounded honest?

"Rafael Falcon, let my last

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words be, 'You're like every killer I ever met, you dumb bastard—' "

Possibly I was never closer to Shell Scott heaven. It's at least true that I would not care to be that close very often.

When Sam did move, however, it was a beautiful movement.

Of course, he was an old pro. He knew it all. I'd seen him in action before, but never with such smooth ease and grace. One moment the bedroom doorway was empty. Then Sam was in the doorway.

Two seconds after that, maybe a second and a half, and it was over. He moved Falcon's body and arm at the same time, so if the gun went off I wouldn't get hit in the head, but Sam didn't move him more than four inches, and the gun did not go off. I knew Samson was strong, but I'd forgotten how strong.

When he slapped Rafe's wrist with his right hand, left hand still guiding the movement of Falcon's body, and twisted, cranking the arm around and up behind Falcon's back, he broke that arm at the elbow.

I heard the pop, and Falcon's agonized scream. Sam hadn't intended to break it, I'm sure. That would have been brutal. Of course, he could have shot him in the back of the head, from the bedroom. The thing most certainly broke, however, and seemed to keep on breaking for a while, and that was all, end of the line, for Falcon.

Then there were lots of cops.

I said, "I hope I didn't disturb your sleep, gentlemen." A bit icy, I was.

Sweat was pouring off Sam as if he was outside, and it was raining, and he was too bemused to come in out of it. But did he tell me he was sorry for the delay? Sure, in a pig's eye, he told me.

I stalked over to him and said, "What were you doing, out on the golf course looking at divots?

It took him a while to smile, and he looked around a bit, making sure everything was under control. Then he smiled.

"I wanted to see if you could talk your way out of it," he said.

"Yeah. And on my headstone you'd engrave, 'He couldn't.' "

"That will teach you," he said, "to call me a fuddy-duddy."

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I laughed.

And Captain Phil Samson hauled off and socked me a tremendous one in the belly. He was actually glad to know I was still alive.

9

IT TOOK NO time at all to get the story out of them. Most of it was spilled before we left the house and headed downtown.

Some of it—the complex motivations, the sex, the lust not only for flesh but for money, the desire twisted into greed and the lies on lies compounded—might never be fully told. But we got all we needed. Most of it was contained in what I'd told Lynn and Georgina. Especially Georgina.

We picked up a few interesting items. Like Rafe's having been smart enough not to leave the murder gun in the car, reasoning that even a drunken Moulder would probably have thrown it away right after the crime. The cartridge case had been a rather nice touch, since ballistics could match it to the other cases, or to the gun, for positive identification.

Only Rafe hadn't been smart enough to get rid of the gun itself. It was the same .45 he'd been aiming at my head. As I'd told the man, he was a dumb you know what.

Another somewhat intriguing item was the fact that the twenty-five thousand clams Falcon had personally paid to Vincent Blaik, to make sure he blew Moulder's defense, was the bulk of the twenty-eight thousand which Rafe and Georgina had themselves extracted from the Hollywood Hills Estates safe, back in the beginning. It had not been difficult for Georgina to loiter near hubby enough times to memorize the combination.

Twice in the year since Falcon paid Blaik off with the twenty-five G's, Blaik, knowing, or at least thinking—erroneously as it turned out—that Falcon couldn't do anything about it, had hit Falcon up for a "loan." Another five thousand each time. So in addition to the fact that Blaik was the natural victim in the plan to frame Moulder for murder, and the further uncomfortable fact that Blaik knew all about the original frame, Falcon thus had one more reason for killing him.

As for Lynn, handling her had almost literally been child's play for Falcon. Handsome, glamorous, nearly old enough to be her father, he'd sold her a bill of shoddy goods, made her believe he intended to marry her, though he actually planned, of course, to marry the well-to-do widow, Georgina. Maybe Lynn had suspected the real reason why Falcon wanted her to lead Blaik to the Hideout, but she'd believed what she wanted to believe, and she had wanted to believe Rafael Falcon.

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From Rafe's point of view it made little difference what he told Lynn as long as she did what he wanted, because he expected her to die along with Blaik. It very nearly worked out as planned—and almost surely would have, except that Rafe didn't anticipate my running into Blaik and Lynn, and leaving the Hideout with them. He couldn't possibly have anticipated that.

Even before framing Leslie the first time, Rafael and Georgina had been cavorting, planning; maybe even then, in the beginning, thinking ahead to Moulder's release, especially after Leslie conveniently blew up in court. I never did know if the real core of it all was lust, or sex, or love, or mainly Falcon's greed for money, for a slice of the Hollywood Hills pie with Georgina on the side.

I don't know what it was in the beginning, but at the end it was murder—and they wound up hating each other, which to me somehow seemed rather nice. The whole thing can't be put in a nutshell, but I suppose there's a word for it. And at the end, Georgina had a last word for me.

With everything wrapped up, just before she turned and walked out through the door of her house for the last time, the very last time, I spoke to her briefly.

She didn't say anything while I spoke, finishing with, "As for Blaik, I don't know, these things happen. And they're paid for one way or another, one time or another. Maybe Blaik got what was coming to him. But I've at least a little idea what Leslie was like before he went—an innocent man—to prison. And I know damn well what came out of that college. I've a hunch you'll pay more for that than for Blaik."

She stood before me, looking coldly at me, ice in her eyes.

"Well, that's it," I said. "Believe it or not, I wish it hadn't turned out like this, Georgina."

She turned on her heel and started out the door, flinging back over one shoulder her exit line. "Call me," she said, "Mrs. Moulder."

I GUESS YOU could class me as an optimist. In fact, at certain times, like this time, maybe, it might even be considered pessimistic to call me merely an optimist.

Because I was in a phone booth, dialing the number of Miss Jasmine Porter.

And it was three o'clock in the morning.

The phone rang once, twice. Ah, she's there, I thought optimistically. She'll be glad to hear from me. She'll be real hungry again by this time.

I should have been conked out, I suppose. But I felt surprisingly good. Part of the reason is that laughter, lusty, healthy laughter, is plasma for the blood, tonic for

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the spirit. And I'd had a fine, lusty laugh.

I had learned what delayed Samson so long in the bedroom. Not from Sam—never, never would he have told me. I got it from Sergeant Kidd. Samson had no sooner managed to open a window, climb into the bedroom, and close the window again, than recently-arrived Rafe had, boomingly, told Georgina, "I'll wait in the bedroom, baby."

Sam had sped into the closet so hastily that he'd knocked a pile of clothing, some on metal hangars, down upon him. Then Rafe was only feet away and Sam couldn't move. When the action started, Sam had to untangle himself from hangers without clanging them together, none of this made easier by his working in darkness.

When he finally got untangled—after an episode with a brassiere which I found very funny—the closet door squeaked, and he had to open it slowly and with care.

With care—as I well knew—not because he feared that Falcon might hear a soft sound and shoot him; but that Falcon might instead shoot me.

Samson would never tell me himself. But I would always know. And he would never know—not for sure—that I knew. I must have a savage streak in me somewhere.

Four rings so far. Hell, just getting warmed up. Boy, she was going to be crazy to hear from me. She might be starving at this hour.

Well, I was prepared, even for starvation.

Six rings? I must have miscounted. I'll start over again, that's what I'll do.

Then sweetness in my ear.

"Hello? Hello?"

"Jazz?"

"Yes. You sound like—Shell?"

"Of course I sound like him. Who would you expect me to sound like? Hey, did I wake you up?"

"No. I was reading."

"No kidding. Well. That's good. Reading a lot, I mean."

"Well, I'm like that. Whenever I do anything, I do it a lot."

"Fascinating. I should have guessed, having seen you eat—and I'll bet you're famished, what? But never fear. I have a whole packing-box full of goodies."

"I'm not hungry."

"What?"

"I already had a snack."

"Uh. Oh?"

"Yes, about an hour ago."

"You mean—you don't want my goodies?"

"No."

"You mean we're through?"

"Oh, I mean, don't worry about food, Shell. Just come on up."

I hurried. You can bet I hurried. I guess you could say I'm an optimist. Gaily on my way I went, headed for Jazz.

But optimist or not, you can also damn well bet, I did not leave that food behind.

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The Coffin Maker

Deep and dark and hidden was the grave he had dug in the night. It was, I saw—just my size!

by
JONATHAN CRAIG

WHEN HE SAW what Adam Hines was building down there in the shade of the grove between Adam's farmhouse and the back road, he stopped his pickup on the shoulder and sat for fully

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half a minute, wondering whether the long yellow-pine box was really what it appeared to be.

It was, he decided. It could hardly be anything else. Adam Hines was building a coffin. And not just a plain, ordinary coffin, but one with a top part that sloped out to where a corpse's shoulders would be and then tapered gradually down to the other end where its feet would be.

He got out of the pickup and walked down the incline to the grove and stood watching while Adam exchanged the drill in his brace for a countersink and bent over his work again.

Odd old cuss, he thought. He knows I'm here but he won't speak to me or even look my way. He hasn't been right in the head since Lucille left, and that's a fact. He's touched. If he knew about me and Lucille, though, he'd look at me fast enough, and that's even more of a fact.

"Afternoon, Adam," he said, smiling.

Adam paused and turned his face slowly toward him, a stooped, graying man with haunted, deep-set eyes and a stick-thin body in frayed bib overalls much too large for him.

"Cal," he said shortly. "Something you wanted?"

"No," Cal Munger said. "Nothing special. Just stopped by to say howdy."

Adam studied him for a long moment, and then turned back to his work.

"What I do, I do right," he said, his voice almost inaudible, as if he were speaking to himself. "I use screws, not nails. And I countersink the holes, every one."

"Looks like a coffin," Cal said.

"It ought to," Adam said. "I reckon you won't ever see a better one. Better made, anyhow."

"A good job," Cal said. "Real good, Adam." He let a few seconds go by. "Who's it for?"

The circular motion of Adam's right hand on the brace stopped for a moment, then resumed.

"Somebody," he said.

Cal laughed.

"I figured as much," he said. "But who, Adam?"

Something touched the corners of Adam's mouth. It was as close to a smile as Cal had seen on the older man's face since Lucille had left, two months ago.

"Just somebody," he said. "I'd as leave not say."

"Anybody I know?" Cal said.

Adam nodded. "Somebody you know real good," he said.

Cal laughed. "Not me, I hope."

The ghostlike smile touched Adam's lips again. He picked up the board he had been working on, sighted along the edge of it, and lowered it carefully to another position on the sawhorses.

"Been hoping to finish this before dark," he said absently. "Time was I could of done it easy."

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Cal wet his lips. Was it possible the old fool did know about him and Lucille? Was he crazy enough to try to do something about it—something that required a coffin?

"I've been meaning to bring your wire cutters back," he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. "I'll do it tomorrow."

"Looks like it's fixing to come up a rain," Adam said, glancing in the direction of Cal's pickup. "Best get on with my work, I reckon."

Cal hesitated for a moment, then turned and started back up the slope to the road.

"See you, Adam," he called over his shoulder.

Adam said nothing.

By the time he reached his own farm, Cal was able to laugh at the idea of Adam Hines having found out about him and Lucille, much less doing anything so ridiculous as building a coffin for him. But late that night, alone in the second-floor bedroom of the ramshackle farmhouse, he could not sleep.

After all, Adam wasn't right in the head, hadn't been for two months. It was always possible that someone had seen Cal and Lucille together on those weekends they'd spent at that tourist court just outside Gardsville, when Adam had thought she was visiting her married sister there.

At four in the morning, he went down to the kitchen and got one of the pint fruitjars of moonshine from beneath and sink and took it back up to the bedroom with him. He drank half of it, sitting up in bed in the dark, thinking, and yet trying not to think, about how it had been the last time he saw Lucille.

About the argument, and the beating he had given her, and the way she had ran out of the motel room, crying, swearing that neither he nor Adam would ever see her again.

Could it be that Adam knew about that night, as well as the others? If anyone had seen Cal and Lucille, he would have told Adam, not because they cared about him but because they hated Cal. He was, he knew, the most disliked man in the county, a too-handsome bachelor with a liking for women—all women, married or not.

He finished the moonshine and sat staring into the darkness. When the roosters crowed with the false dawn, he still had not slept. Adam Hines was a touched man, and a touched man would do anything, including building a coffin for the man he was planning to kill.

THAT AFTERNOON, after an hour's losing battle against his better judgment, Cal Munger put the wire cutters on the seat of the pickup and drove over to Adam Hines' farm.

The coffin was finished, he saw as he passed it on his way to the

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small clearing where Adam was digging in the ground, and he paused for a moment to stare at it. For what it was, it was a beautiful piece of work. Adam had been right: he'd never seen a better one. He felt a shiver start through him, and he forced himself to turn his back on the coffin and walk the remaining distance to the clearing.

Once again Adam gave no sign that he had seen or heard Cal's approach. He was standing knee-deep in the middle of a large rectangular hole, marked out with pegs and white string, his shirt off, deep-set eyes chill and remote, spading earth out of the hole with the easy, rhythmic sweeps of long practice.

Cal stood gazing at the shape of the hole, while the sweat that lathed his shoulders and ribs grew chill. A hole of that particular size and shape could be only one thing, and it was growing deeper with every spadeful of dirt Adam Hines was throwing so effortlessly to the side.

"I brought your wire cutters back, Adam," Cal said. "Where'd you want me to put them?"

Adam's eyes remained fixed on the black earth at his feet while the spade arced upward and out, upward and out.

"Adam?" Cal said.

"Put 'em anywheres," Adam said.

Cal dropped the cutters to the grass beside Adam's faded denim shirt.

"Doing a little digging, I see," he said.

"A little," Adam said, still not looking at him.

"Storm cellar, maybe?"

"Got a storm cellar already," Adam said.

"What, then?" Cal asked.

"Grave," Adam said.

"Grave?"

"For that coffin I made yesterday."

Cal took a deep breath.

"I see," he said.

"What I do, I do right," Adam said. "This here hole's as near perfect as I can make it. And it ain't going to be none of your five-foot graveyard holes, either. It's going down a full six foot, to the last hair of an inch."

Cal watched four more spadefuls of earth arc from the hole and scatter on the grass beside it.

"This is some kind of joke you're playing, isn't it, Adam?" he said. "It has to be, doesn't it?"

For the first time, the spade stopped moving, and Adam straightened up a little, looking at Cal along his eyes.

"This here's a grave, and that yellow box over there is a coffin," he said tonelessly. "There ain't no joke about them, Cal, neither one of them."

"But who?" Cal said. "I mean, who're they *for*, Adam?"

Adam looked at him, eyes expressionless, and once again that ghost smile of yesterday touched

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the corners of his mouth. The seconds went by, a dozen of them.

"I reckon you'll find that out soon enough, Cal," Adam said at last, turning his back to him. "Sooner than you think." The spade bit into the dirt savagely and swung up and out. "You'll see then whether I'm playing jokes or not."

It was a long afternoon, and a longer evening. Just after dark, Cal put his revolver in his pocket, took the blanket from his bed, got two of the pint jars of moonshine from beneath the sink, and went out to the barn.

In the hayloft he pulled the ladder up on its counterweight, spread the blanket on the hay, and got to work on one of the jars. When he had finished it, he lay back and tried to sleep.

An hour went by, and then another.

And then, finally, he dozed, only to wake with his shirt cold with sweat and a cry on his lips, shaking with the memory of a dream in which he had been sealed alive into a coffin but could somehow hear the voices of the people around him as they lowered him into the grave he had watched Adam Hines digging in the clearing.

He reached for the second jar. There'd be no more sleep for him this night, he knew. He couldn't go on this way, just waiting hour by hour for Adam Hines to kill him. Something had to be done. But what? If he beat Adam to it and killed him, he'd hang.

The sheriff, like everybody else in the county, despised him; nothing would make the county happier than for Cal Munger to die on the end of a rope. And telling the sheriff or anybody else what Adam

was going to do would be a waste of time. It'd get him a horse laugh that would still be going on when Adam killed him.

He took off his wet, clammy shirt and sat down in the hay far back from the edge of the loft, his body tense, ears straining for the slightest sound, waiting for morning.

And with morning came the cold certainty that he had no choice but to kill Adam Hines. Kill him today, within the hour. It was kill or be killed, and the only question was how to do it without dying for it on the gallows. And suddenly an idea came to him of a way it might be done.

Not *might* be done, he reflected as he lowered the ladder and

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climbed down to the barn floor. *Could* be done. It had to work. If it didn't, he'd be as good as dead.

Faint from lack of sleep and food, he forced himself to cook and eat a large breakfast. Then he held his head under the pump for almost a minute, made sure his revolver was in good order and went out to the pickup.

This time, he turned off the back road half a mile from Adam's farm, drove down an abandoned wagon road to a thick stand of trees where he could hide the pickup, and then set off at an angle across the fields, taking whatever cover he could find, to the back yard of Adam's house. Long before he reached it, he heard the sharp ring of a hammer on a chisel, and knew that Adam was once again working on something in the grove.

Just before he ran across the back yard to the door, he caught sight of Adam in the clearing, carving something onto the face of a large square slab of wood with a rounded top.

The crazy fool's made me a grave marker, Cal thought grimly as he sprinted for the back door. A headboard. And now he's carving my name on it. He was meaning to bury me, and bury me good and proper.

In the house, Cal went directly to the closet where he knew Adam kept his double-barreled shotgun. The case and four boxes of shells were there, but the gun itself was not. Frowning, Cal walked quickly through the house, eyes searching for places the gun might be.

He found it in the parlor, lying on the sagging old davenport, newly cleaned and fully loaded. The fool had it ready and waiting for me, he thought as he picked it up. He was ready to come after me, just as soon as he got through chiseling my name on that headboard.

He left the house by the back door, bent low, and ran to the grove. Then, moving cautiously from tree to tree, he approached Adam from behind. Adam had the headboard propped against the trunk of a tree, working with quick, short chops of the hammer.

Cal moved to within ten feet of him, put the shotgun down carefully in the tall grass, where it would be hidden from Adam if he happened to turn around too soon, and then, whistling softly, strode out into the clearing.

This time, Adam Hines did look at him. He paused in his work, hammer raised above the chisel, the sunken eyes locked reproachfully with Cal's.

"You got a habit of sneaking up on folks, ain't you?" he said tightly. "You ask me, it'd be a good habit to get rid of."

Cal smiled and bent over the headboard, as if to see what Adam had been carving there. Then, whirling suddenly, he brought his fist crashing against Adam's jaw with all the power of his strength

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and weight behind it. The older man's body jerked backward and sprawled full length a dozen feet away. He lay on his back, completely still, a trickle of blood seeping from one corner of his mouth.

Calmly, now that the riskiest part was over, Cal got the shotgun from the edge of the clearing, wiped it carefully to remove his fingerprints, and placed it lengthwise on Adam's body, the muzzle pressing beneath his chin. Then, closing Adam's left hand over the stock, he pushed the unconscious man's right forefinger through the trigger guard and, looking away, pressed Adam's finger against the right trigger.

The roar in his ears was deafening. The shotgun, kicking free of Adam's hands, skidded across the grass almost to the edge of the clearing.

It was all going to work out beautifully, Cal saw as he walked after the gun. When the sheriff got here, he would see Adam lying dead, obviously the victim of his own hand, a suicide, a man known to have been broken and strange ever since his wife had left him, a man who had slowly become so crazed that he had dug his own grave, built his own coffin, carved his own headboard, and then taken his life with his own shotgun.

But the gun would have to be nearer Adam's body, with the muzzle nearly in line with the horror it had wrought. Then he'd take the headboard home with him, burn it, and wait for someone to discover that Adam Hines had killed himself.

Grasping the shotgun with his handkerchief, he carried it back to Adam's body. And then, as he leaned over to put the gun in position, his heel pressed down on the round handle of Adam's chisel and he slipped, dropped the gun, and fell.

The gun roared a second time, and suddenly Cal felt a strange nothingness in his legs. There was no pain. He forced himself up on an elbow and looked down at his legs. Both his trouser legs were already black with blood, and his right leg was bent sharply at midthigh, where the bone had been shredded by the shotgun blast.

He was bleeding his life away, he knew, unable to move, with no one to hear him call for help.

And then the pain came, sharp and terrible, and he cried out with it and twisted over on his side, trying to get away from the pain, trying to get away from his own legs.

A scant foot from his face stood the headboard Adam Hines had been carving moments before Cal had hit him.

And now, as the carved letters blurred before his fading eyesight, he knew why Adam had dug the grave and made the coffin and had his shotgun ready for use.

The letters on the headboard read: *Here Lies ADAM HINES*

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A New Short Novel of Midnight Terror

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THE CROOKED WINDOW

Some things no man can take and stay sane.

Like pain—or fear—or murder in the night.

by HARRY WHITTINGTON

THE LAST THING she ever said to him was, "I'll hurry, darling. I'll be right back."

Bill wasn't disturbed and was only slightly impatient when she didn't return in fifteen minutes. Even after forty slow minutes rusted away, he merely inched in from the sun, just touched by the claws of panic.

He checked his watch again. Any man who'd ever waited for his wife outside a department store knew few women had any conception of time. The fact Marge wasn't his wife didn't alter the way he felt except to sharpen the urgency of his impatience.

High pressure tensions seethed inside them from the moment they'd met at eight this morning. Everything added to it, their knowing they had the whole day together, the end of an enforced separation, inner excitement after a long melancholy time apart.

He'd driven without looking at her, not needing to look at her to

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see her: the old-coin perfection of profile, chin just a shade too stubborn, squared jaw, ripe-wheat color of her body; the way her grape-brown eyes were charged with shadows, so you were never really content about what went on behind them.

After two hours with her, he'd parked outside Gracey's department store in the forty-acre shopping center. Through the glass windows he saw women stirring, the restless way ants churned in a distubed way.

Marge had gotten out of his car, taking her large white sling pocketbook. He'd growled low in approval. He said, "Wow."

She turned, smiled over her shoulder. She pushed open the glass door, entered the store. He watched her go along the first aisle and suddenly he lost her.

One of the windows was set at an angle, or was flawed; perhaps the sun reflected from the pavement obscured his vision, *something*—he could see no one beyond that particular window. Everything looked distorted through it. It was as if Marge simply disappeared beyond that glass.

Bill blotted perspiration from his forehead, got out of the car. He glanced toward that distorting window. In it he saw enlongated reflections of parked cars and a stringy character ten feet tall that he recognized as a caricature of himself.

At the package store, he stood near the door, watching his car. Two customers dallied ahead of him. Bill bought a fifth of Scotch, hurried back to his car, carrying the bottle under his arm.

He got into the front seat, and sweated and waited. Somehow he felt an added uneasiness everytime his gaze struck that distorted window. This was ridiculous, but there it was.

He'd met Marge at somebody's cocktail party at the beach. He'd not wanted to go. He'd sat alone with a martini. It had been a rugged year since Rosemary died, her death something impossible to recover from easily. Someone introduced him to "Marge mumble" and disappeared.

She'd smiled at him. He glowed back at her, and it wasn't entirely the drink. She was double-distilled loveliness in flesh-colored bikini and the ultimate in golden sun-tan.

They sat in deck chairs overlooking the gulf and sipped drinks and talked. She'd once played trombone in an all-girl orchestra.

They'd talked for a long time, but when he looked back, he saw she hadn't said much about herself, and she'd neglected to mention she was married.

They met again accidentally. She was friendly and just oddly restrained enough to bewitch him.

"Yes, I'm married," she said. "I thought you knew, that night at the party. My husband nibbled at the

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hostess the whole evening. Gordon Cronin."

He felt unaccountably empty.

It was another week before he saw her again, and saw those faint bitter unhappy depths of her eyes.

"I'm so glad to see you, Bill," she said. "I've thought about you often."

He felt the sharp prickling of a new kind of emptiness. No matter what sort of man Cronin was, or how unhappy he made her, he was her husband. He said, "How's Gordon?"

The smile faded. She withdrew, remote, polite and distant again.

He saw her a couple of times at a distance. He wanted to invite her to have a drink with him, but he let her go away from him.

But as though it were the workings of some destiny he couldn't even quarrel with, they ran into each other constantly.

He had a martini and she had a daiquiri in a dim-lit cocktail lounge. Other couples whispered in shadowed booths.

"I've thought about you," he said. "Lord, how I've thought about you."

"One night I almost called you."

He felt the impact in the pit of his stomach. He stared across the table. Whatever it was to be, it had started between them. It had begun that afternoon at the beach, the moment they met, and it had been stock-piling ever since, no matter how they tried to deny it.

"Just this day," she said. "We can have this day, can't we?"

"Maybe then we can go back to living according to the rules."

Three days later she called him because he had not called her. She said, "I know we had our day together, Bill. Things aren't better. I need you so."

Holding her in his arms, he said, "Why don't you divorce Gordon, Marge? That's what you've got to do."

She burst into tears. "Don't you think that's what I want?"

"I don't want to wreck your marriage—"

"Oh, darling, that was a shambles before you came along. I've begged Gordon for a divorce. He said he'd kill me first." She dug her nails into him. "If he finds out about you, he'll never give me a divorce. It would give him a twisted kind of pleasure, denying me the chance to be happy."

It was impossible, going on meeting secretly. Once she met him with bruised face, eye blackened.

They parted.

Bill tried drinking, and this was not the answer. He tried other women and found them thin comfort. He worked harder, he swam alone, saw movies alone, and she was in all his thoughts, close beside him.

When he couldn't be casual about it any more, he reached for the phone to call her. At that instant it rang.

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"Bill," Marge said. "We've tried. As long as we can. I've got to see you."

Sitting in the sun-basted car, Bill checked his watch. She'd been in that store almost an hour. He stared at that flawed window. Everything was out of focus.

It was cooler inside the store, but crowded. Once he thought he saw Marge. He called out. Everyone else looked at him and he overtook the woman at the lingerie counter.

He was unable to think why he'd believed she resembled Marge. He moved away, going to the sporting goods area, seeing hunting jackets stacked on glass cases.

A clerk looked at him tiredly.

"I'm looking for—my wife," Bill said. "She came in about an hour ago to buy a hunting jacket."

Her brow tilted. You met all kinds on sales days.

"I know it's a mob scene. But maybe if I described her? She's about your height, has dark hair, a deep tan. In her twenties, a green and white sheath dress." His voice wavered.

The clerk watched him with an odd intentness. "I remember a young woman, about an hour ago. Bought a hunting jacket. Sheep-lined. Ordered it gift wrapped."

He returned to his car. He stepped off the curb and leaned inside. There was no longer even the trace of her perfume. There was nothing except the Scotch bottle wrapped in brown paper and lying on the back seat, waiting.

The sporting goods clerk located the store detective.

"Mr. Hankins," she said. "This young man needs your help."

Hankins was lean, with gray-streaked hair combed in neat waves across the bald spot on his crown. His lips were tightly compressed in a faint smile.

"We're having a sale," the detective said. "Maybe your wife wanted to look at some of the other bargains."

"She said she didn't. We were in a hurry."

The detective glanced at him, led him to the telephone offices. After a moment Bill heard a modulated voice on the public address: "Will Mrs. Cronin please return to her car at the front entrance of the store, please? Mrs. Cronin."

The detective walked out front with Bill. He seemed astonished that Marge was not there ahead of them.

"She'll be along in a minute," he said.

"That's what I told myself an hour and a half ago."

Hankins shrugged. "Things like this happen all the time. A woman goes in a store, forgets where she parked her car." He laughed. "Even forgets where she left her husband."

Bill stared at that distorted window, did not answer.

After ten minutes, the detective

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said. "Maybe your wife felt faint, dropped into the dispensary."

The store nurse, a tall woman in her early thirties, shook her head. "No. Funny, big sale like this, there's usually a dozen frail women to be carried out. Not today. Got a hardy bunch today. Your wife hasn't been in here, Mr. Cronin."

Bill gazed over Hankin's head at the crowded store. Until this moment he'd been restrained by a sense of his being impelled by unfounded fear. He'd been self-conscious, stalking the huge store, appearing mildly hysterical.

All that was gone now. He thought about the way he and Marge had met this morning, hands clinging, fingers entwined. A long, melancholy parting was over temporarily, they were together, with plans for a long day together.

He looked at the nurse and the detective. It was clear enough in their faces what they believed. They thought it was all very simple. She had walked out on him.

He walked back through the store alone, looking for her dark hair, the golden tan, the green and white dress. He heard the modulated voice again requesting Mrs. Cronin to return to the front entrance of the store. He scarcely listened. She wasn't going to answer that thing, either.

Why would she walk out on him? And how much sense did the alternative make, that something had happened to her against her will?

Somebody openly overpowered her in a crowded store? Somebody forced her against her will to leave? How? With a gun in her back?

She was not in the car. He got in, backed out of the parking space. A car horn barked at him. He slammed on brakes. He drove slowly around the store, pausing at all four glass exits.

Deeply troubled, he stepped on the gas, reached the area exit, turned downtown. One smart thing to do, enlist the aid of the police.

His mind sped ahead to the moment when he arrived at the police station. The faster his thoughts raced, the slower the car traveled.

He reached Bay Shore drive, parked beside the sea wall. The sunlit bay sparkled with metallic sequins.

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If he reported Marge missing, this meant giving her name, his own name. Nothing mattered except finding her. Yet the thought that something violent or mysterious had befallen her was unreal. Perhaps she'd met friends in the store whom she could not escape without revealing she was with him. She strove desperately to keep Gordon from learning about him. But would she have left the store with them?

This wouldn't stand close scrutiny, but he could stir trouble for her if she were not lost.

The more he delayed, the worse he made it if Marge had run into trouble. Still he had to consider what would happen when he brought in the police. Gordon would be notified; he'd learn Marge had been spending the day with Bill Wisdell. He would wreck everything.

Bill tightened his hands on the steering wheel. Marge wanted to escape Gordon. Had she decided to run?

This angle was riddled with holes. Her only hope to escape would be in securing his promise not to report her disappearance, give her a head start.

This brought him back where he started. Something had happened to Marge. Nobody ever just walked away and disappeared into thin air.

Still, the moment he reported her disappearance to the police, all that had been between them would become public knowledge, and Gordon was part of that public.

Marge was smart, self-reliant. Would she permit herself to be taken from that store by force or coercion?

He started the car, returned to the shopping center. He cruised around Gracey's building one more time. He drove across town to the place where they'd left her car. It sat locked, baking in the sun.

He parked on Cherry, entered the four-storied apartment building where he'd lived since Rosemary's death. He had great luck with women. *Love him and die—love him and disappear.*

He shoved open the door, reminding himself there was a simple explanation. His getting snarled up in superstition wasn't going to help.

He hurried up the steps, came out of the stairwell on the second floor, went swiftly along the corridor. Subdued noises, laughter, a voice abruptly high, suddenly quiet, had nothing familiar in them. He glanced around, everything seemed changed, alien in a way he couldn't explain.

He found his key ring, shook it out, chose a key. It did not fit the lock. He brushed away the flaring of panic. His mind was playing tricks.

He heard the telephone ringing beyond his locked door. This added to his sense of frustration and impatience. He found the right key, fought it into the lock.

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He shoved the door open, went directly to the phone. He lifted the receiver, breathless. "Yes."

"Bill. Ted Wyatt. Where you been? We've been calling ever since you reported in sick this morning."

Bill sagged against the couch arm. "I went out."

"That's for sure. Where's the copy on the Golden Citrus Account?"

"God knows, Ted."

Wyatt's voice chilled. "God and you better know, Bill. We need it, and now. We've ripped this place apart."

Bill could not think. He'd spent hours polishing the fifty words that would accompany the display of a bikined-girl and a giant orange in a national campaign. "Right now, I don't know where it is, Ted."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm sick. I don't feel like arguing it."

"Neither do I. But I've got to have that copy. I'll call you back in five minutes."

"No. If I find it, I'll call you."

"You better come in tomorrow, Bill. We can't fluff this account. Meantime, find that copy. You read me?"

Bill replaced the receiver, unable to concentrate on the missing copy. Worse than that, he could not care.

He walked across the room, closed the door. He sat down on the divan, stared at the phone. He'd never realized how dead and useless the instrument could be.

A knock on the door brought him to his feet.

He opened the door. It was not Marge. His neighbor from across the hall stood there as if somehow loosely suspended from the ceiling. His hair was rumpled and combed across his eyebrows. He wore tight black slacks low on his hips, shirt tail hanging out. His shirt was sweated.

"Came over to borrow something."

Bill exhaled. "All right, Marlin; what is it?"

Marlin shrugged and walked past him into the room. He said, "She ain't here, huh?"

"Who?"

"She walked out on you, huh?"

"Who?"

"Is that it, friend? Man, that's tough. That cripples. A doll like that. You don't hardly find that kind on every street corner."

"Why don't you go home, Marlin?"

"I hate seeing you like this, man. I've got addicted to that doll. What she's got, they got laws against. I have stood behind that door of mine with the door slit open just enough to watch you two coming along the hall." Marlin smacked his lips. "Man, does she have what it takes!"

Marlin Dix did a modified Watusi about the room. He flopped into a club chair, his chin slumped against his chest.

"How about I borrow a fifth of something? I'll repay you next time

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I hit at the races. Got a friend over there. She wants a drink first, you know?"

Marlin took the fifth of Scotch Bill had bought earlier at the package store. He went out and closed the door behind him.

Minutes dragged slowly. Bill went into the kitchen, made a sandwich, listening for the phone bell. He brewed coffee and then walked out without eating anything.

He heard the stereo blasting through the walls from Marlin Dix's apartment. He'd never heard it so loud before.

He dialed Marge's number. He listened to the phone ringing, heard the receiver lifted. He held his breath, waiting.

"Hello." It was Gordon.

Heart sinking, Bill covered the mouthpiece with his hand. Holding the receiver tightly against his ear, he strained to hear Marge's voice in the background.

There was only the singing vibration of the wires. Gordon said, "Hello. Hello."

Bill replaced the receiver.

The music blared through the walls from Marlin Dix's apartment. He smelled the coffee. Thirty minutes passed and he went on sitting there.

He could not buy any answer except that Marge was at home. Something was wrong and she could not call him back. He dialed her number again.

This time it was answered before the first ring died.

"Hello," Gordon Cronin said. "Hello."

Bill sat with the receiver against his ear. Gordon's voice rasped. "All right! Who are you? What do you want?"

When Bill remembered to look, night had closed out the world beyond his windows. His apartment was as dead and silent as the telephone.

Bill waited. Across the hall Marlin Dix and friend had the stereo louder than ever. The noises accented his own aloneness. Other nights he'd sat alone and lonely.

He'd waited for her before. It was never easy for her to get away to him. How much he'd taken from her, how much he'd expected, how little he'd given in return!

He walked out of his apartment. Anything improved on sitting in there waiting.

He paused outside his door. For that brief moment there was silence across the hall, as though Marlin held his breath over there, waiting.

He shook this thought from his mind.

He glanced at his watch, surprised to see it was past seven. At eight this morning, he and Marge had met, brimming with desire and longing and pleasure because they were together. Eleven hours.

He got into his car and drove across town. The street where Marge lived was quiet. He drove

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slowly past her house. Cars lined the curbs. Old trees shaded the parkways.

He stared at her windows as he cruised past. Her house sat back on a deep lawn. One light burned downstairs. A late model hardtop convertible was parked in the drive. He did not see Marge's car.

In the next block he parked at a vacant lot, returned along the walk toward Marge's house. Somebody stepped suddenly from the shadows of a pepperhedge and he stopped, rigid.

It was an elderly man, leading a small dog on a leash.

Bill felt weak in the backs of his legs.

The man jerked on the leash and the black Cocker strained against it.

Wearing brightly flowered sport shirt, slacks, the man stared at Bill as he passed.

Bill walked toward Marge's house, unable to shake the feeling that the old fellow had been standing in those shadows a long time, staring from the hedge into Marge's windows.

Bill paused in front of the Cronin home. A shadow moved within the lighted room and his heart lurched. Then a man walked past the window. It was Gordon.

He walked to the end of the block, turned left and went into the alley.

Almost to the garage behind the Cronin house, he saw the man and the dog again. He stepped into shadows, waited.

He entered the Cronin yard through the gate. He felt like a thief, prowling the yard. He'd taken the man's wife, lost her. What more harm could he cause Cronin?

He went cautiously to the lighted window, peered inside.

Gordon was alone in the house.

He sat on a straight chair beside the telephone table. The way Gordon sat was clear, he was waiting for that phone to ring.

Bill felt all the good drain out of everything he'd had with Marge. Gordon looked ill with worry. He'd done serious hurt to that man in there, no matter what excuses he'd made.

He'd always considered himself an ordinary, decent guy. When Marge came along, he told himself she was bitterly unhappy and he was lonely.

None of this was reason enough any more. Whatever else he was, he was an instrument for terrible wrong.

Gordon poured himself a drink of straight whisky, tossed it off.

Staring at him, Bill wanted to make it up to him. He had to find Marge. He had to go to the police.

The sound of a speeding car on the street brought him up, tense. Tires squealed as the car rounded the corner. Headlights flicked across dark trees.

Bill pressed into the shadow.

The car skidded into the drive-

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way, parked behind Gordon's hardtop convertible. Doors were opened on both sides; lights and engine were killed. The doors slammed.

It was a gray police cruiser. Bill crouched in the shadows. He heard the doorbell. The cops were not looking for him, and he had waited too long. He did not have to report Marge Cronin missing. Her husband had already done it.

He walked back to his car, shaken. No sense pretending there was an easy explanation for what had happened at the shopping center this morning.

Women disappeared. But not in a crowded store, not a woman like Marge. He admired Gordon for calling in the police. He should have done it this morning.

He started the car, drove back across town. He parked outside his apartment building, entered, climbed the stairs. Music from Marlin's apartment blasted at him as he emerged from the stairwell.

He knocked on Marlin's door. Again he had the strange sense of tension beyond that door. The music continued. He knocked again.

Marlin yelled through the door facing. "You selling something, we don't need nothing."

"It's Bill Wisdell."

The door was cracked open. Marlin showed his nose and one eye. "Yeah, friend? Music too lively? Too loud? I'll cut it right down, old friend."

He saw Marlin leaned against the door, barring it. "I'd ask you in, old friend, but my friend's not feeling well. Okay? You forgive me?"

Marlin closed the door. The key turned in the lock.

Bill entered his own apartment. Everything was as he'd left it. He went into his bedroom, sprawled across the bed. He lay there sleepless the rest of the night. At daybreak he got up, undressed and showered.

He snapped on the radio while he brewed fresh coffee. It was on the newscast. Local woman missing. Mrs. Marge Cronin, wife of prominent local real estate broker. Car found parked on downtown street. Husband unable to account for wife's disappearance. Home relations the best, the husband said. Wife planned to shop at Gracey's department store, did not return home. Husband notified police eight o'clock last night. Police located Mrs. Cronin's car an hour later, leading them to suspect foul play. Mrs. Cronin last seen wearing green and white sheath dress. Statewide bulletin released at midnight. At an early hour this morning there was no word on Mrs. Cronin's whereabouts.

Bill snapped off the radio. He went downstairs, got into his car. He drove into town, slowed down outside the police station, but did not stop.

He parked near his office, walked the rest of the way to work. People passed him. Their faces

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were blurred, unreal, the way the bright morning itself was unreal.

He entered the advertising agency office, spoke to the receptionist without looking at her. Sitting at his desk, he stared out the window. There was a reasonable answer. He had to find it.

"Bill." He jerked his head up.

Ted Wyatt had been standing for some minutes across his desk. In his early thirties, Ted was impeccably groomed, with a hard look of success about him. He asked about the copy and Bill looked up, face blank. "My God, haven't you given it a thought?"

Bill located the copy in his brief case. Ted took it, glanced through it. "Did you make the changes?"

"What?"

Ted's gaze was cold. He tapped the copy with his fingers. "I'll turn this over to Halsey. You better take the day off. Your eyes are bleeding all over the rug."

Bill sweated, driving slowly in the sun. The shopping center was as crowded as it had been yesterday. It was a bright day, fat clouds puffing across a faded sky.

He circled the big store, not really looking for anything. He felt like a man possessed, drawn back to this place against his will.

Not allowing himself to think, he drove back into town. He parked near the police station, walked toward it in the sweated sunlight.

Cluttered desks were lined in rows, most of them unoccupied in the detective bureau. Windows opened on the blind wall of an adjoining building.

At a desk near the rear of the room, a detective stared up at Bill, then jerked his head toward a chair facing him.

Bill sat down. The detective was stocky, looking like an ex-football linesman. His bullet-shaped head sat rammed upon his shoulders as if he had no neck at all. He wore a dark suit of lightweight material. He was sweating. A name plate on his desk read: *Sergeant Elwood Cardiac.*

"The woman missing your wife?" Cardiac said.

Bill chewed at his lip, shook his head. "No. But I was with her."

He told Cardiac how he'd met Marge, driven her to the shopping center. He did not mention their stopping for two hours at a motel, their plans to return there.

"Why didn't you report it yesterday?"

Bill looked at his hands. "I told the store detective. He didn't take it very seriously."

"And you called her house?"

"Twice. There was no answer—I mean, her husband answered."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No."

"And you didn't tell anybody else until right now?" Cardiac shook his head. "You just went back home?"

"I didn't know what else to do."

"You heard the radio report this

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morning that Mrs. Cronin was missing? That when you decided to come in?"

"I want to find her," Bill said.

"You've put yourself in a bad position, Wisdell. She left home to meet you. And you just about admit you're the last person to see Mrs. Cronin alive."

Bill sat forward on his chair. Those small eyes in their fat sockets ate into him like an acid. For the first time he admitted consciously that Marge might be dead. He shook his head. "Who'd want to kill her?"

In a gray police cruiser, they broke every traffic ordinance on the drive to the shopping center. Cardiac did not even slow down for stop streets. Tires screamed at every corner.

Hankins sat with his feet up on a packing crate in a supply room at Gracey's.

Cardiac greeted the store detective coldly.

Hankins stiffened slightly when he saw Bill. He said, "Oh, hello, Mr. Cronin."

"The guy's name is Wisdell," Cardiac said.

Hankins shook his head. "But I helped Mr. Cronin find his wife yesterday."

"You helped him find her." Cardiac's eyes narrowed.

"I supposed he found her," Hankins said. "He left."

"Her name is Cronin. She's missing. Wisdell said he never saw her again after she came in the store."

They rounded up the sporting-goods clerk on the way to the dispensary. The nurse said, "I told you people yesterday, I hadn't seen the woman."

Hankins shrugged. "As far as that goes, I never saw her, either. I just took this man's word that she was in here."

A man entered the dispensary and the store employees practically genuflected. Hankins introduced him as Mr. French, store manager. French asked for a briefing on the matter and Cardiac went over it for him.

"This could prove embarrassing for the store," French said. In his early fifties, he wore a continual, meaningless smile. "I dislike having the store involved in matters like this."

"I'd say the store is not involved," Hankins said.

French looked hopeful. "Indeed?"

"As far as we know," Hankins said, "Mrs. Cronin was never in this store. We have only this man's word. And yesterday he said his name was Cronin. Now his name's not Cronin. Maybe the woman's not even missing."

"She's missing, all right," Cardiac said. "But I agree, we've no proof she was ever in this store."

Bill stared helplessly at the stocky detective. Cardiac met his gaze, expressionless. Bill reminded

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the clerk that she had remembered Marge's dress, the sheepline hunting jacket Marge had bought.

The clerk's face was ashen. French said, "A clerk sees hundreds of customers in a day. They often resemble one another. I see no cause for this store to be involved in this matter at all."

Bill stared at Cardiac. "This clerk saw her. She's afraid to say so."

"Let me handle this, Wisdell," Cardiac said.

"Where are you going to start looking for her? You've got to begin here. This is where she got lost."

Cardiac's mouth twisted. "Don't tell me how to be a cop, Wisdell. You got anybody else can prove that *you* were out here yesterday?"

The package store clerk frowned, studying Bill.

"I was in here about ten, yesterday," Bill said. "I bought a bottle of Scotch."

The clerk flushed slightly. "I may have seen you. I get rushed in here. About ten? Yeah. You stood near the door. I remember because you never did come all the way in. You acted nervous, said it didn't matter what brand of Scotch. I remember now. You acted jumpy."

The clerk stopped talking. Cardiac leaned against the counter, his gaze on Bill, but nothing showing in his heavy jowled face.

Bill said, "I thought she might come out of the store before I got back I was watching for her, that's all. I—"

He stopped talking. He felt them staring at him.

THE CELL was hot. Bill loosened his collar, drew his hand across his face, feeling helpless, frustrated.

Men talked in low tones in nearby cells. Bill gripped the bars. When the righteous Ted Wyatt heard of this, he'd be out of a job. Only this didn't seem important now.

"Mr. Wisdell?"

Bill stared through the bars at a slender, brown-haired man in a rumpled suit.

"I'm Peterson, from the *Record*. Could I talk to you a couple minutes?"

"I thought Cardiac already told you no."

"Mister, if we listened to the detectives, we'd have nothing to put in the *Record*. You got anything you want to say?"

Bill held his breath a moment. "Yes. Mrs. Cronin did disappear yesterday from the Gracey Department store at the shopping center. Those people are afraid of adverse publicity, but it's still a fact."

"Nobody out there will admit they saw her?"

"If you want a story, there it is."

Peterson shook his head. "That's no story for the *Record*. Gracey's stores are one of our biggest advertising accounts. You think we want to cause them mental anguish?"

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Bill walked away and lay down on his cot. He did not know how much time passed. He heard a guard at the cell door and he looked up. Cardiac stood behind the guard. "Okay, Wisdell. On your feet. Up to my office. A few questions."

Bill stood up. "I've told you everything I know."

"Sure you have." The stout face remained expressionless. "It's just that we've thought up some new questions."

Three straight chairs and a pine desk furnished the interrogation room. Cardiac pushed up the windows. The room remained breathless. His shirt was sweated, plastered to his skin. He flopped down behind the desk. "What did you and the doll argue about, Wisdell?"

Bill stared at him, shook his head.

"Come on. What did you fight about? Was she tired of you? Maybe you got tired of her?"

"You're all wrong—"

"She wanted to stop seeing you? You didn't want her to?"

"No!"

"You wanted her to leave her husband? You fight about that?"

"She wanted to leave her husband. I had nothing to do with that."

Cardiac leaned forward, sweating. "We get a different report from Cronin, friend. We get the word there was nothing wrong between Cronin and his wife. He swears they were happy."

"Maybe he was. She wasn't."

Cardiac shook his head. "Your story just don't stand up." His voice hardened. "We think you're lying, Wisdell. You've lied from the first. What about that motel?"

Bill winced. "We stopped there. From eight to ten."

"Only you didn't tell me about that."

"It had nothing to do with her disappearance."

"Then why didn't you tell us about it? We're going to keep after you. In relays. We'll go home and sleep, but you won't. Before we're through with you, Wisdell, you'll beg us to let you tell us the truth,

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and nothing but the truth." Cardiac stood up. "Save yourself a lot of grief. You can make it easier on yourself. Easier on all of us. You can tell me right now. What did you do with her body?"

Bill stared up at Cardiac, fists clenched. He sat on the edge of his chair, ready to spring. There was a knock on the door.

Cardiac grinned. "Yeah. Come on in."

Two detectives entered, a man between them. Bill sat back, exhaling. Cardiac had stretched him out on a rack, and it was just beginning.

One of the detectives said, "This is her husband, Cardy. Mr. Gordon Cronin."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Cronin." Cardiac came around his desk.

For a moment Cronin seemed unaware of Cardiac's extended hand. His gaze appeared turned inward, upon some fearful sight he didn't want to see but could not pull his gaze away from.

Bill felt a sinking in his solar plexus. Cronin looked young, vulnerable. He pushed his fingers through his dark wavy hair in an automatic gesture. There was the look about him of a man who has lost weight on some impractical crash diet. Despite this, he was handsome, carefully groomed.

He carried a newspaper folded under his arm. Bill read one black word: Missing. Beneath, in a three column cut, was Marge's picture. Bill stared at that photo.

Gordon said, "I'm sorry." He wrung Cardiac's hand.

"We understand how you feel, Mr. Cronin," Cardiac said. Cardiac inclined his head toward Bill. "This is the man who was with your wife, Mr. Cronin. He admits he was the last person to see her alive."

Bill stood up. Gordon's gaze moved over him. Gordon's face reflected his inner sickness. He had refused to believe Marge had a lover. Now he had to believe it. They left him nothing.

Gordon shook his head, eyes agonized.

Two strangers, Bill thought, and both of us loving the same woman. Despairing, he admitted he'd hated Cronin because it made it easier; he had to hate Cronin or himself. Now he was sorry, but it was too late. It no longer mattered.

Cardiac asked quietly, "You know this man, Mr. Cronin?"

Gordon shook his head.

"You've never seen him before?"

Gordon sat down. "I told you I hadn't." The newspaper slipped from his arm to the floor. Everybody glanced at it, looked again at Cronin.

Cardiac's voice was flat. "Sorry you had to learn it like this, Mr. Cronin. But this man was with her, all right. He admits it."

Gordon kept his head bowed, shaking it back and forth slow-

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ly. He did not look up or speak.

"They met three months ago at a beach party. They've been meeting constantly since then," Cardiac said.

Bill glanced up, taut. True, they'd met, but Cardiac's recitation left out the weeks and days they'd tried to stay apart, the hopeless feeling after Gordon refused to divorce her. All this Cardiac disregarded.

He didn't expect a medal, but it had been a good love, no matter what evil they made of it from this moment.

"She had a key to Wisdell's apartment," Cardiac said. "He says she's been trying for three months to get a divorce."

Gordon's head jerked up. "That's not true. I never heard of this man until today."

"She never mentioned him to you? Never asked for a divorce?"

Gordon shook his head. "No. We argued sometimes. Every married couple does. But trouble—like this? No, never."

"You didn't know she was seeing some other man?"

"No. I never believed that." Gordon lifted his head, stared at Bill as if he were vile. "I don't believe it yet. I can't."

Bill met Cronin's gaze. Their eyes clashed. What about all Marge said, Gordon's drinking, his callous infidelity?

Cardiac said, "We're not trying to make you suffer needlessly, Mr. Cronin. But this man insists your wife wanted a divorce."

"Why would I refuse her a divorce if she no longer loved me?" Gordon whispered. His voice shook. "How could I know she wanted a divorce? She never mentioned it."

"You couldn't, Mr. Cronin. But he has an answer for that, too. He says your wife accused you of getting your kicks from seeing her suffer, that it would have been worse on her if you'd known there was another man. She says you drank to excess—"

"Oh, God," Gordon whispered. "Are we talking about the same woman? Marge wouldn't say such things. Anyone knows they're not true! This man lies! He knows where she is! Ask him! Ask him!"

Two detectives leaped forward to catch Gordon as he sank to the floor on his knees. He covered his head with his arms, sobbing.

The detectives paused with their hands just above Gordon's shoulders. Then they straightened, staring at Bill.

Bill drew his hand across his mouth. It was no longer real; it was a nightmare where the truth was suddenly lies, and lies were the truth.

Cardiac's voice lashed at him. "You begin to see what you've done, Wisdell? You see what you are? Now let's start over. Now let's have the truth."

Bill straightened, his fists

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clenched. Cardiac stopped in the middle of a stride that carried him toward Bill. He jerked his head toward Cronin. "Get Mr. Cronin out of here. No sense putting him through any more of this."

The detectives helped Gordon to his feet, led him out. Bill stood at the barred windows. The nightmare chill seeped down through him.

Cardiac sat on the corner of the desk, swinging his leg. He said, "Back to your cage, Wisdell. We'll tighten the noose without your help."

"I didn't kill her. I haven't lied."

"Sure. You hang on to that thought. You're innocent until proved guilty. Only don't count on it too much."

Bill met his gaze. "With you, I won't."

There was a man in his cell when the baliff returned Bill to it.

The jailer said, "You two should get along fine. You have a lot in common."

Bill frowned. A lot in common? Except he had the feeling he'd seen the graying man before. What could they have in common?

Bill lay down, hands locked under his head. He wondered if he would ever sleep again.

The slender man, in sport shirt and rumpled slacks prowled the cell, muttering about the indignities of his arrest.

The bailiff led a stout, neatly dressed man in his late forties to the cell, unlocked the door, motioned him to enter.

The visitor carried a heavy attache case. He scowled. "Isn't there a room where my client and I can talk in privacy?"

"Sorry." The bailiff shrugged.

The lawyer entered the cell. He grinned at the elderly man. "Came as quickly as I could, Keyley. Have you out by morning."

"I want out now. How can they hold me? How can you permit it?"

"You better tell me about it, Keyley."

"I was out walking my dog, Masters."

Bill looked up, remembering where he'd seen Keyley before—walking that dog outside Cronin's house last night. Keyley had jumped guiltily from that hedge.

Masters said, "Cops tell me they caught you prowling around the Cronin house. Is this true?"

"As I told them, Masters, my dog got away, I was looking for him."

"At two in the morning?" Masters inquired gently.

"I don't care if it was five. Isn't this a free country? A man has a right to walk his dog. You know I don't sleep well at night, Masters. Haven't in years. My dog is getting old and his kidneys are not what they used to be. He has to go out at all hours."

"I know that, but how could the police be expected to know?"

"They could believe me."

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"They say they found your dog at home." Masters shook his head, grinning. "They say the dog was in the house when you all got back there. They were going to release you, but the dog had no leash on, was in the house."

"I left the door ajar."

"And the leash?"

"Maybe I didn't put it on him. I meant to take him into my own yard. But he got playful, ran away. He's old. I got worried, went looking."

Bill Wisdell still lay, holding his breath.

Masters said, "But why the Cronin house? Why were you fooling around there?"

"My dog liked Mrs. Cronin. She saved steak scraps for him." Keyley flared. "The police had no right to manhandle me."

"You got violent, Britton. The patrolman says he brought you in to teach you a lesson. But the people they questioned in your neighborhood today put you squarely behind the eight ball. I think you're just an old fool who ought to know better. But the police take a different view—they see you as a Peeping Tom—potentially dangerous and a menace."

"How?" Britton Keyley danced from one foot to the other.

"According to your neighbors, you've been repeatedly warned about peeping in windows of young married women. Complaints pile up, Britton. Latest is the way you've made a nuisance of yourself pursuing Mrs. Cronin—"

"She didn't complain!"

"She felt about you as I do, that you're an old fool. But people saw you peeking in her windows, day and night." Masters sighed. "And now it's landed you in trouble."

Keyley shrugged. "That's what you're for, to get me out."

"If I can. If you satisfactorily account for your time from eight, the morning Mrs. Cronin disappeared, I'll get you released at once."

Keyley waved his hand, mouth twisted. "Where I was is none of their business! None of their business!"

"Be stubborn. I'm afraid you'll have to stay until I can get a writ, or until the police learn to their own satisfaction where you were."

"None of their business!"

"Britton, listen to me. A woman is missing. A woman you annoyed, chased."

Keyley stood rigid, face purpled. "She didn't care anything about that drunk she was married to!"

Bill's hands trembled. He stared at Keyley. The aging man strode to the bars. "Cronin stayed drunk. He was a nothing. She needed a man."

Masters laughed, walked to the cell door. "That didn't concern you. But it's put you in jail and pulled me away from a bridge tournament."

When Masters was gone, Bill sat

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up on the edge of his cot and stared at Keyley. His fists clenched until they ached. He wanted to grasp Keyley's throat and tighten on it until that senile Don Juan begged to tell where he was the day Marge disappeared.

Didn't this dangerous sort often menace quiet neighborhoods? The harmless old man who lived with his fancies until they became real and urgent?

Couldn't Keyley have followed her that morning? The two hours they spent in a motel could have fired him into a frenzy. Then he could have followed Marge into that store—

If Keyley had threatened to tell Gordon she was seeing Bill, wouldn't Marge go with him out to his car, thinking she could calm him down, that he was harmless? If he had gotten her into his car—and she'd fought him?

Bill shook himself, as if waking from a nightmare. He stood in the middle of the cell, fists clenched.

Keyley peered up at him, eyes distended. "What's the matter with you, Wisdell? You flipped?"

Bill forced himself to relax. Suppose Keyley was as harmless as Marge believed him to be? What would the police be doing while he assaulted Keyley? All Cardiac needed was an assault charge and he could hold him indefinitely.

Bill stared down at the wiry little man, wanting to crush him, knowing he could not touch him.

He turned and fell face down across his cot. It grew quiet in the cell block and at last Bill fell asleep, exhausted and overwhelmed by a sense of helpless fatigue.

In his sweated dream he saw Keyley parking in some desolate lane, pulling Marge to him, threatening to expose her to Gordon unless she submitted. The dream was more vivid than reality. He saw Keyley standing over her, striking her, beating her until she was dead.

He woke up suddenly, shaken.

He sat up, stared across the cell. Keyley could tell him where Marge was. That dream was too real to discount. He no longer cared what the police might do to him for assault.

The bunk was empty. Keyley was gone.

Bill sank back on the sweated cot. For a long time he was unable to move.

THE GUARD opened the door of the interrogation room. Bill stepped inside. Cardiac sat behind the desk in a swivel chair that squealed when he moved.

Cardiac said. "How'd they treat you last night?"

Bill shrugged, drew a deep breath. "What about Keyley? They picked him up prowling around Marge's house. He refused to say where he was—"

"Why don't you let us handle it?"

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"Sure, and you'll have me in the electric chair before Christmas."

Cardiac shrugged. "Maybe not. Maybe you're telling the truth. If so, somebody else lied. If you told the truth you're just a guy who fell for a married doll. Another one. Couldn't put all the guys in jail that ever fell for a married dame, or vice versa. Falling for Mrs. Cronin don't make you guilty of anything else, on the face of it. Even if you'd broken off with her, this still might have happened."

"Yes. There's always Keyley."

Cardiac sighed. "Besides you and Keyley, there is a little more evidence I turned up last night."

Bill's heart slugged faster. He stared at Cardiac, admiring him despite himself.

"This Marge Cronin. Used to be a musician on tour with a girl band."

"Yes."

"She was playing in a local night spot—five, six years ago. Marge Wilson she was then. Place was robbed. Now, she happened to be on her way from the rear of the joint and came face to face with the leader. Her testimony sent this hood to prison. They threw the book at him."

"Good Lord."

"Yes. But that ain't the worst. This Tony Carcole. Every racket in the underworld. Here's the way it could be. Marge married Cronin, quit the band. After all these years of brooding on it, maybe Tony sent orders from prison for some of his pals to lean on her."

Breathing deeply, Bill waited, watching Cardiac's face. "Makes sense. Tony's friends finally located her, followed her, marched her out of Gracey's. If she was scared enough, it could have been done silently, attracted no attention."

Bill swallowed, not daring to hope. "She might be alive?"

Cardiac stood up. "Being dead might not be the worst thing could happen to her, if Carcole's boys did get her. She hurt Tony deep. He might want her hurt real bad and deep—"

"We've got to find her!"

Cardiac caught Bill's arm roughly. "*You* haven't got to do anything. We got trouble enough without your help."

"If she's alive—"

"If you want her to stay alive, you stay out of it." Cardiac's voice lowered. "We'll do all we can, Wisdell . . . You can clear out of here now. . . . We're releasing you. But if you've lied to me, God help you."

His car had been thoroughly checked. Such trifles no longer mattered. He thought about Tony Carcole, what Cardiac had left unsaid. He shivered.

He drove to his apartment building, went up the stairs, along the corridor to his room.

Marlin Dix's apartment was silent. Approaching, he got the sense of somebody waiting over there for

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him to pass, so they could breathe again.

Scowling, he unlocked his door, stepped inside and stopped cold, staring around.

No wonder the police had left him alone last night. They had gone through his apartment as they'd searched his car. As he anticipated, his souvenir Luger was gone. He hoped they didn't try to fire it. He'd taken it from a thief in occupied Germany. The gun had lain here since his tour with the army ended.

He returned to the front room, found Marlin Dix leaning against the couch, clothes looking more rumpled than ever.

"How'd you get in here, Marlin?"

"You forgot to close your door so it locked."

Bill frowned, then shrugged. "You've drunk the last of my whisky, Marlin."

"I don't want a drink. Just wanted to say hello. I've missed you."

"Okay. So long, Marlin."

Marlin gave him a melancholy smile in his long face. "I don't mind how cold you treat me. I know what's eating you. You're all knotted up. You don't have to tell me. I used to watch the way she walked when you brought her up here. The way she walked. I went wild over there, thinking about you and her. Then this bad thing happened. Like, man, I bleed for you."

THE MAN behind the narrow bar stared at Bill. Bill said it again, "You know Tony Carcole?"

The man shrugged. "You don't know Tony Carcole, either, mister, if you think you'll find him in a dump like my place."

Bill was aware of other customers staring at him, unblinkingly. He pushed away his bourbon glass, turned and walked out, feeling those unrelenting eyes on his back.

This was the sixth place he'd tried in Tony Carcole's part of town. Nobody said they didn't know Tony Carcole, but they wouldn't admit having seen him, either.

He started the car, rolled slowly along Eighth Avenue, searching for the next bar or restaurant. Cardiac had warned him away from here. What was he supposed to do? Forget about Marge?

He parked near the Madrid Bar. This was the most elegant of the area bars, done in Old Spanish motif. There were less than a dozen people in the lounge at this hour.

The bartender nodded. "Sure, I know Tony Carcole. Like a brother. Haven't seen him. I don't keep up with my brother, either."

"Do you know if he's still in prison?"

The bartender looked Bill over, then walked to the end of the bar.

The street door opened and a small, swarthy man in a gaudy, tailored suit entered, walking on the

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balls of his feet. He and the bartender exchanged a quick glance.

The man sat on the stool beside Bill's. The bartender came, anxious to serve him, but the man let him wait. He stared at Bill. "You looking for Tony Carcole?"

Bill nodded. "Why?"

The man shrugged. "You want to see Tony, come with me. You don't, you quit asking around town about him. It's that simple."

Bill slid off the stool. The man walked out, moving on the balls of his feet. He did not look back to check whether Bill followed or not.

The side street was somber and dimly lighted. The man walked into the obscuring shadows. In the middle of the block, he crossed the street.

The three-storied red-brick building was laced with wrought-iron balustrades on long narrow balconies. At the foot of shadowed stairs, the man paused, motioned Bill ahead of him.

Bill glanced one last time along the street. Nothing eased the unfathomable dark. Cats licked at shadows.

They climbed to the lighted, third-floor corridor. Bill heard laughter, talking, click of gaming wheels. The man rapped on a door. A voice said, "Yeah?"

"Tony. It's Fredo. I got the guy that's been asking about you."

Fredo nudged Bill ahead of him into a garishly lighted, lavishly furnished bedroom suite. A woman in a slip washed her red hair in a basin at a mirrored stand. A man sprawled across the rumpled bed. About forty, he was muscular, lean. His dark hair receded at his temples. He wore dark slacks, an expensive silk shirt, opened at the collar.

His black eyes impaled Bill. "I'm Carcole. You wanted to see me?"

Fredo spoke. "You recognize this guy, don't you, Tony?"

Carcole frowned. "Face looks familiar."

"Sure. In the *Record*. He was with the Cronin dame when she disappeared."

Carcole swung lithely up from the bed. Savagery rutted his dark face. "Where is she?"

"That's what I came here to ask you," Bill said.

Silence laid heavy on the room. Carcole drew the back of his hand across his mouth. "I been two weeks out of the pen. I had fellows looking for Marge Wilson. My guys didn't find her. Then she disappeared."

"If you've hurt her, so help me I'll—"

"I meant to lean on her. I still will, when I find her." Carcole shrugged. "Maybe somebody tipped her I was out looking for her, and she ran." He clenched his fists. "I better never find out somebody warned her."

Neither Fredo nor the woman would meet his gaze. The woman

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whined something unintelligible. Fredo said, "You know we wouldn't, Tony."

"I better know you wouldn't." He pulled his gaze back to Bill. "I was going to look you up, Wisdell. You saved me the trouble."

"I just heard about you."

Carcole snagged his shirt front. "From the Cronin doll?"

Bill knocked his hand down hard. Fredo and the woman gasped. Bill said, "I heard it from Cardiac."

Carcole laughed. "So you came looking for me."

"I've got to find Marge."

Carcole looked him over. "Yeah. Rush out and look for her. Come down here, asking about me. You don't care what you stir up, huh?" Carcole jerked his gaze past Bill. "Fredo, call Garcia and Vega. Get this guy out of here."

Fredo went out of the room. Carcole stared at Bill. "Don't ever come back here again."

The door opened. Fredo stood there with two other hoods.

"Okay," Fedo said to Bill. "Let's go."

One of them tripped him at the head of the stairs. Another shoved him. Bill grabbed out wildly for the railing. He caught it long enough to break his fall. He rolled down the stairs.

At the foot of the steps, Bill pulled himself up slowly, seeing their shoes, their legs closing in on him.

They let him get halfway up. A knee in his chin knocked him backwards. A hand chopped across his throat. One of them kicked him in the face. He tasted blood. They lifted him and heaved him into the littered alley. They braced him against a wall.

Fredo spoke, close against his face. "Stay away from Tony Carcole."

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The back of a hand punctuated this order.

They took their time, working him over. The world tilted, wheeled and skidded past his head. They walked away and left him there.

He managed to crawl into the abysmal dark behind a discarded ice chest. He lay waiting for the world to stop spinning, for the fiery pain to subside, for the rubbery weakness to leave his legs. . . .

He did not know how long he stayed huddled there. He pulled himself erect, looked about in a soiled and somber dawn.

He walked, bracing himself against the wall, to the street. He shambled along the side street, pressing his fists against his buckle.

His car was where he'd left it parked near the Madrid Bar. He sat under the wheel, clinging to it with both hands. Gradually the world settled slightly.

He started the car, drove slowly, yet every bump was torment. He'd learned one thing. Carole did not have Marge. If Carcole didn't have her, somebody did.

Bill stepped harder on the gas, disregarding the agony in his stomach. When he reached the street where Marge lived, he turned in, slowing.

Driving past Marge's home, Bill felt his stomach muscles take another hitch. The pain was worse than physical agony, different.

A police cruiser drifted past. Both patrolmen glanced toward him. Bill parked before Britton Keyley's white-frame house, a block beyond the Cronin home. Venetian blinds were tightly drawn across the windows.

He sat a moment, gathering strength for the impossible walk to the front door. Panting through his mouth, he leaned hard on Keyley's doorbell. He kept his thumb there until he heard Keyley's testy, high-pitched voice.

Keyley opened the door, glimpsed Bill's battered face, took an involuntary step backward, eyes distended. Keyley tried to close the door. Bill caught it and forced his way in.

"I want to talk to you about Marge Cronin, Keyley, and I'm not your lawyer. You're going to tell me where you were the morning she disappeared."

"Get out, or I'll call the cops."

"Go ahead. You think there's anything more they can do to me? You'll look a lot like I do by the time they get here."

Keyley backed away. "I know what you did to Marge. I saw you with her. I know now what you are."

Bill advanced a step. "Where were you?"

"You want to know something, you see my lawyer."

Bill walked toward him. "Where were you, Keyley?"

Keyley turned to run. At that moment a car stopped at the rear

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of the house. Keyley raged with laughter. "The cops, Wisdell! They sneak around, checking. They don't leave me alone five minutes. They don't want me leaving the house. Shall I call 'em in, Wisdell?"

Bill lunged forward. He clapped his hand over Keyley's mouth.

Keyley bent his hand down with vicious strength. "Cop is crossing my back yard. He'll knock at that door in a second to be sure I'm in here—"

"Where's Marge?"

Keyley suddenly struck Bill in the stomach. There was no doubt he was strong enough to have killed Marge. Fires flared in Bill's stomach. Gagging, Bill turned, toppled against a wall.

Through the agony paralyzing his brain, Bill heard the hard rapping at Keyley's rear door.

Keyley laughed at him. "Hang on, Wisdell. I'll bring the cop in to talk to you."

He turned and strode through the house toward the kitchen, his dog yapping at his heels.

Bill stumbled across the room, opened the front door and half fell through it. He took giant steps, losing his balance, catching it.

He fell into his car, started it. A red haze clouded everything. He tried to keep from speeding, but it was as difficult as not checking his rear-view mirror every few seconds.

He parked behind a black car outside his apartment building on Cherry Street. He stumbled along the walk.

"Good lord, Wisdell. Who'd you talk back to?"

Bill watched Cardiac get out of the black police car. Cardiac said, "Where you been all night?"

Bill spoke from the agony in his belly. "I been looking for Marge."

"Thought I warned you—"

"What you told me doesn't matter. Marge matters. If—she's alive, she needs help. Not the kind you cops are giving."

"We're working, Wisdell. We found out about Tony Carcole. He's been out on parole two weeks."

Bill pressed his fists against his stomach. "I could have told you that."

Suddenly Cardiac laughed. "So that's where you been? Yeah. You found Carcole, all right. That's plain enough."

Bill walked painfully slowly toward the entrance of the building. He spoke across his shoulder. "What do you want?"

Cardiac shrugged. They did not speak until Bill unlocked his apartment door. Cardiac said, "Tony have his goons work you over? His parole board would frown at any rough stuff."

Bill shrugged, going toward his bedroom. He reached the door, stopped there as though poled. He stared at his bed, then shook his head, gagging.

Cardiac ran across the room.

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"Wisdell! What's the matter?"

Bill sagged against the door jamb, unable to speak. Cardiac growled, deep in his throat.

Marge lay where she'd been thrown across his bed, like a doll broken and discarded. The green and white sheath dress was soiled and torn. Agony tore at Bill. He had found Marge, but he was too late. She was dead.

BILL PRESSED against the door-jamb to keep from falling. All he'd ever known from Marge was goodness, gentleness. And now she was crumpled, dead, slain by someone who hated her so terribly he could not let her go on living. Who, Marge? Tell me who!

Cardiac walked to the bed, almost reluctantly. He leaned over Marge's body, found a bullet wound. He touched her face, tried to move her rigid arm.

Cardiac checked the bed cover, the floor around the bed. He stood up, brushing his knees. His voice rasped. "Where's she been all this time?"

Bill did not answer. He had no answers, and he saw that Cardiac expected none. Cardiac walked into the front room. Bill heard him at the telephone. He tried to think, but his mind was numbed.

The police arrived and he heard them talking with Cardiac in the front room. They spilled into the bedroom, lab men, photo team, technicians.

Cardiac's voice was taut with rage. "I searched this apartment yesterday. Myself. We didn't miss anything."

A uniform patrolman brought in the building janitor. Paulson was frightened, a little man conditioned to timidity where the law was concerned.

Cardiac asked Paulson if he'd seen Wisdell last night. Paulson shook his head. "Unless he came in the back way, I wouldn't see him. I don't think he ever has come in that way."

Cardiac drew hard on his cigarette. "You see anybody else come in that way last night?"

"Why sure, the paper man, the laundry man, a grocery delivery—"

"You know all of them?"

Paulson said he did, that he had noticed none of them carrying anything unusual. Cardiac waved him away. Cardiac asked the patrolmen for reports from their checking hallways, elevator, talking to neighbors. All results were negative.

"Except the fellow across the hall," a patrolman said. "Nobody at home. Name's Marlin Dix. I asked the janitor."

The telephone rang. For a moment all activity in the apartment ceased.

Instinctively, Bill moved to answer it. Cardiac waved him away. "Don't bother, Wisdell. Any calls for you from now on will come to you through me, if at all."

Bill sagged against the door. The

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sound of Cardiac's voice made him jerk his head up. "Yeah. You make a report and hang on. Let nobody touch nothing. The coroner is here. I'll get over as soon as I can."

Cardiac replaced the phone. Another detective said, "More trouble?"

"What else?" Cardiac jerked his head toward the bedroom and Marge's body. "Her husband this time. Cronin. Somebody shot him. About fifteen minutes ago."

Bill sat on the front seat with Cardiac. When they turned into the street where Cronin's house stood, the curbs were lined with cars. Neighbors stood, whispering, news reporters and photographers moving among them. An ambulance was pulling away from the Cronin drive as Cardiac parked out front. It turned toward town, red light whirling.

Three uniformed patrolmen met Cardiac and Bill at the walk. One said, "We got here about ten minutes after the first call to headquarters, Sergeant. Two cruisers. None of us saw anybody leaving."

"Ten minutes gave him plenty of time," Cardiac said. "Did you question all the neighbors? Who heard the shots?"

A woman stepped from the chattering group. "I live next door. I heard the shots, but none of us saw any strangers around."

"How many shots?" Cardiac asked.

"Two. One, and then a silence. I stood listening. Then there was this other shot."

Cardiac glanced at the patrolman. "They told me he was shot once in the stomach?"

"That's all. We found no sign of the other bullet."

"What was Cronin's condition when they took him out?" Cardiac asked.

"Serious. But he was alive. He wasn't unconscious."

"Did he say who shot him?"

"He didn't make sense. He said nothing about himself or his wounds. He kept saying, 'Have they found my wife? Have they found Marge's body? Have they found my wife yet?' It was as if he didn't know he was shot, or didn't care, all he could think about was his wife."

Cardiac said, "Did he have a gun on him?"

"Yes."

"Any chance he put the bullet into himself?"

"There were no powder burns, as there would have been if he'd held the gun close to his stomach. And the way he was shot, too awkward. There was somebody else in there, all right. The place looked as if they'd fought first."

Bill trailed Cardiac into the Cronin house. His nerves tightened. He'd never been in this house while Marge lived; it seemed wrong to be in it now.

The patrolman had not exaggerated. The front room was wrecked.

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Cardiac stalked through it. He came close to Bill, glared at him. "You really started something, didn't you, fellow?"

Bill sat silently against a wall in Cardiac's office for almost two hours. He tried to think, but nothing came out straight, it was as if he saw everything through the distortion of that flawed window. He learned from Cardiac that Marge's body had been removed to the Reid Funeral Home.

Finally Cardiac told him, "You can go, Wisdell. Temporarily."

Bill walked out into early afternoon sunlight. He got into a taxi, gave Reid's address. But when the cab pulled in before the funeral parlor, he sat staring at it. He shook his head, gave the address of his own apartment house.

He sat back in the cab, shivering. When he looked up at his apartment building, he knew he could not go in there, either. Was this the way it would be for the rest of his life now that Marge was dead, nowhere to go, nothing to do with himself?

The cab pulled into the curb, but Bill sat, remembering something they'd said earlier outside the Cronin house. The neighbor women had seen no strangers leaving the Cronin place. But couldn't a man who prowled the neighborhood constantly, walking his dog, go almost anywhere without attracting attention?

Bill said, "I've changed my mind." He gave Britton Keyley's address.

Bill sank back in the seat. What did he hope to accomplish at Keyleys? Was he going there because he'd rather be moving, even in the wrong direction, than thinking and remembering? When he thought, he saw Cronin's distracted face, the way Gordon asked about Marge even after he was shot.

This didn't tally with what Marge had told him about Gordon and their bankrupt marriage. Still, no matter how blameless he'd been in Marge's death, he'd attempted to take her from Gordon. Only hurt had resulted.

The driver pulled in before Keyley's house. Bill paid him and got out. Going along the walk, he felt he was being watched.

He rang the doorbell. He heard movement inside the house, Keyley's little dog barked, but no one came to the door.

Bill pressed the bell; its ringing vibrated through the house. He rapped on the door. The dog yipped louder. People came to their windows in neighboring houses.

Suddenly Keyley appeared in the doorway, wild-eyed, trembling, his face ashen.

"Get away from here!" Keyley shouted, his bugling voice summoning spectators.

"I want to talk to you," Bill kept his tone level.

"You want to get in here where you can kill me, like you shot young

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Cronin and killed his wife. Clear out! I'll keep yelling. I'm yelling for my life. You hear me?"

"Open this door and stop yelling."

"Anything you got to say, you say it from right there."

"Where were you when Gordon was shot this morning?"

"In my own house! Ask my neighbors. Ask them cops that have been guarding me."

Bill's sweated hands trembled. He grabbed the door handle, yanked the door open, breaking the flimsy lock.

Keyley staggered backwards into his house, screaming. Bill lunged after him, caught his shirt in his fists. "Shut up! All I want is for you to tell me where you were the day Marge disappeared."

Keyley broke free of his grasp, stood laughing up at him. Hands shaking, Keyley jerked a notarized affidavit from his pocket. He threw it at Bill. It struck him in the chest.

Bill caught the paper, read it, reread it slowly.

Keyley's cackling laughter clawed at him. "Don't you wish you had something like that, killer? Something that would clear you, the way that paper clears me?"

Bill exhaled heavily, placing the affidavit face up on a table. Keyley was frantic with laughter. "She wrote it down. I was with this other woman all that day that your doxie disappeared. We finally got her to give this statement when Cardiac

convinced her it was the only way I could stay out of trouble."

Bill retreated a step. This testimony cleared Keyley of any connection with Marge's disappearance. Bill shuddered. The only one in this whole nightmare who could not be cleared was a guy named Bill Wisdell.

He said emptily, "I'm sorry, Keyley. I'm sorry."

Police sirens sliced through Keyley's laughter. "Now the cops are coming for you, killer."

Bill shook his head, moved past Keyler to the rear of the house. Keyley's taunting laughter spurred him like tines of a fiery fork. He didn't pause for breath until he reached Fourth Street. Forcing himself to slow, he stood in the sun, his knees watery, looking around for a taxi.

Bill left the taxi, entered his apartment building, feeling an uncontrollable urge to check across his shoulder. The pain in his belly in-

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tensified. Entering the second floor corridor, he saw a man leaning against his door.

He recognized Marlin Dix and frowned. Dix was the last person he wanted to see. Dix wouldn't take one drink, he had to have the fifth, never played music except full-volume. He got on his merry-go-round at dusk and rode it all night. He bet every penny he could borrow at the races, and then would roll a drunk for one more bet, even if the drunk happened to be his best friend, or his brother.

Marlin said, "Been waiting for you, friend."

"What have I done to deserve that?"

"You're bleeding, man, from a heart that's all bled white. Thought I could cheer you up."

"You moving?"

Dix laughed. Needling never reached him. He didn't live for the effect of others on him, only for his own effect upon himself. He was his own universe.

Bill unlocked his door, stepped inside, barring it to Marlin. He closed the door in Marlin's face, locked it. Marlin pounded on the facing. "You're committing unfriendly acts, friend! How can you do this to yourself, locking *me* out?"

Bill stood unmoving until he heard Marlin walk away. He looked around the room, shivering. He refused to think; he was too tired. He wanted to sleep.

He sank down on the couch, he pressed his fists against his temples, needing to escape the thoughts tormenting him. Would his life ever return to normal? Nothing had prepared him for this, not even Rosemary's death. After her long illness, he accepted her dying before it happened. Afterwards he'd wandered without roots or aim. Gradually, the anguish diminished, became a memory of pain. When he found Marge, he'd thought he was starting a new life.

He lay back on the couch, exhausted. He fell asleep, but neither restfully nor deeply.

In his dream, he drove to Gracey's, parked, watched Marge get out. He wolf-whistled and she turned, loving his loving her. He traced her going through the windows, then suddenly he lost her, as if she stepped into some distorted world behind that crooked window.

In his sleep, he cried out, twisting on the couch.

He got out of his car, ran into the store. He counted off the windows, seeking the one into which Marge had plunged. No one would help him. They would not believe such a window existed, or even that Marge existed.

He stumbled suddenly and fell, toppling, yelling into the nothingness behind that window. The store nurse, detective, clerks, turned away laughing, on coffee break. They didn't see a thing.

He landed finally on hot, rough cobbles. He yelled for Marge,

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found a door. He stepped through and found himself in a carnival fun house, glittering with distorting mirrors, everything misshapen, himself most of all.

"Marge!"

People at other concessions turned, laughing at him. A man with a twenty-two fired at him instead of the moving targets. Music blared full-volume from the girly show. He ran to escape the music but only got lost deeper in the fun house.

Holding his arms over his head, he crashed through a mirror and sprawled into the runway sawdust. Store detective, nurse, clerks, manager, all accused him of willfully destroying priceless mirrors.

Cardiac shambled with long rubbery strides to arrest him. The man who owned the concession looked like Gordon Cronin and wept into his beer while he made love to the bearded lady. He tried to stop crying but he could not stop. Bill told him he was sorry; it was not what he meant to do.

People standing around jeered at Bill when he spoke, and threw hot dogs and sugar candy at him. He ran. He plunged downhill, but it tired him as though he were climbing. He sat down and they yelled at him to get off the bowling alley.

He heard thunder of glass bowling balls striking wooden pins, fragmenting into flying shards. He could not escape the thunder of the bowling alley no matter how fast he ran. . . .

The thunder increased, sharpened. He opened his eyes and sat up. Somebody was pounding on his door.

He got up, aching and sweated. He opened the door and Cardiac entered. "What's the matter with you?"

"I've been asleep. I fell asleep on the couch."

Cardiac's mouth pulled. "Scared of your bedroom, Wisdell?"

Bill winced. "I guess so. For now anyway."

Cardiac's face relaxed slightly. "You've got it rough, and that's the truth. I'm looking for the guy across the hall."

"Marlin was here just before I went to sleep."

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Then it was hours ago. But you'll find him. Nobody's lucky enough to lose Marlin for long."

"Figure he might have seen somebody bring that girl's body into his apartment. He may even have seen you bring it in, Wisdell. And I could have already had you picked up today—threatening an old man. It don't look good for a suspected murderer, Wisdell, assaulting him for what he might know about you and Mrs. Cronin."

"I thought he had hurt Marge, taken her from that store."

"Take my warning. Lay off. You want it in the face, just keep sniffing around."

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Bill didn't answer. He returned to the couch, sat down. After a moment Cardiac went out, closed the door behind him. Bill wanted to get out of here. He was afraid to sleep again.

Yet, awake, things were as fouled up as in his nightmares.

He walked to the nearest restaurant, ordered supper and then couldn't eat it. He bought a newspaper and there was Marge's picture and his, and Gordon's, and the whole story, down to the name of the director in charge of her funeral.

Tomorrow. Less than a week ago she had been his love. His fists clenched on the paper.

He walked slowly toward his apartment in the darkness, everything distorted as in a surrealistic nightscape.

Bill walked faster, hurrying, because he had nowhere to go and he could not stand to move slowly any more.

Music torrented full-volume down the corridor from Marlin's apartment, spewing through the slightly opened door. The strange green light that Marlin fancied spilled out.

Bill rapped on the door. "Marlin."

There was no answer. He shoved the door open and waded into the caterwauling music. Vivid orange walls appeared billious in the green light. Unfinished canvases were set to catch window light. Records and albums clotted every chair and the couch.

Marlin sat close beside his wailing stereo-player, bent toward it. A race program lay open where it had fallen beside his chair.

Bill went nearer, stopping when he saw the blood on Marlin's shirt. The room spun suddenly around him. Marlin's head hung oddly forward on his chest, odd even for Marlin. He was dead.

Bill did not touch him. He stood frozen in the horror that had begun that sunlit morning at Gracey's—had begun there, but was never going to end.

"You poor clown," Bill said. He didn't know whether he meant himself or Dix. Somebody had stopped the world and let Dix off.

Bill retreated a step in the green-lighted orange room.

Police had sought Marlin, to question him about anyone's entering Bill's apartment. It looked as though Marlin really had seen someone. Who?

Who but the police knew Marlin was being sought as a material witness in Marge's murder?

Just one person knew. You. Bill Wisdell.

He stared at his trembling hands. Despite the full-range music, there was a sense of deathly still. Under the cry of the music there was no sound at all, no movement. There was only the waiting stillness.

Bill looked around the orange room. Somebody had walked in,

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turned up that music, and shot Marlin. Had Marlin sat calmly, waiting for it? Who could have gotten to him like that? It had to be somebody Marlin knew well, had no reason to suspect.

Who fit this description more neatly than Bill Wisdell?

Like the killer's leaving Marge's body in his bed, it was pointing at him, screaming his name, tightening the frame!

He trembled. Was he the only sane person in an insane world? Or had he flipped? These things couldn't happen in a rational world. Would this explain the crooked window he alone saw in that store?

Maybe to ordinary people these past days had not been disordered and unreal.

He backed toward the hall door. He checked the corridor, stepped out. Let Cardiac find Marlin's body. Then what? Instant motivation. Marlin saw you bringing Marge's body into your apartment, Wisdell. So you had to shoot him.

He could see Cardiac's gray face, bared teeth.

He turned quickly toward his own door, then stopped as if it were the mouth of a trap. He could not even enter his own apartment. If he did, he was as good as dead. Where could he go? He had loved another man's wife and the world closed ranks against him. He was no longer safe in his own apartment.

He held his breath, convinced someone stood beyond his door, breathless, waiting. Who was in his apartment awaiting him? Cardiac? The killer?

He walked woodenly toward the stairwell, feeling that he could not force his legs to move fast enough. He had to get out of here. He had to run.

Run where?

BILL PAUSED at the door of the apartment building. Wind sighed in date palms. The sky clotted, cloud-frosted and melancholy. Every breeze stirred limber apparitions in the somber dark.

He was almost to Fourth Street before he asked himself where he was going. Where could he go? It did not make any difference. They would find him. He wanted only to stay free long enough to meet with the man who'd killed Marge.

He walked along the north side of the street. He did not know what he was looking for. A police car cruised slowly past. Instinctively he moved closer to shadowed buildings.

His gaze brushed a vacancy card under the name of a walk-up hotel. He climbed the stairs slowly.

The room opened on an alley, an airless box. Bill sat on the bed, the walls crowding him, like the tightening jaws of a trap.

He washed his face, forced himself to lie down on the bed. He had to sleep. When his mind was clear, he could think.

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He sat bolt upright, hearing heavy footsteps approaching. Two men argued past his door.

He couldn't stay in here any more. He opened the door and stepped into the hall, walked toward the rear of the building. He pushed open the window, stepped out on the fire escape. He went down it stealthily, dropped the last six feet to the alley.

A police cruiser swung off Central in a fast turn. Bill ran into concealing shadows. The cruiser slowed, brakes crying. "Hey, you!"

Bill sprinted, spurred by that voice striking him in the back. He did not look over his shoulder. He heard a patrolman running behind him, yelling again.

Bill ran faster. The gun blast sounded like a cannon in the night stillness. He darted through a paved passage.

He saw the lights of the cruiser dancing ahead of him. He moved cautiously in the unfathomable darkness, watching until the cruiser rolled behind him in the alley.

He was crossing Fifth when he heard distant sirens as more cruisers joined the hunt. He stalked through darkened yards. Breathing through his mouth, he took long irregular steps on rubbery legs, as if he'd run deep into his own nightmare.

Brooding darkness settled around him, growing thicker like vaporous fog. The cruisers bayed like hounds behind him.

A car swerved suddenly from a cross street into the alley and he sprang into the shadows like a frightened cat.

The car rolled past, two boys in an old Ford. He crouched breathless, then straightened up and ran again.

He stepped out of a yard and paused, troubled. He looked around in the darkness. Something was upsettingly familiar about this place.

His stomach muscles tightened; this was the street where Marge had lived. No matter where he started, this was where he ended. He ran in crazy circles, always coming back here. It was as if he kept returning to her, only she was not here, and never would be here any more.

Police cars fanned out, loud on surrounding streets. He needed a place to hide. It was as though Marge gave him the answer. The last place the police would look for him? In Marge Cronin's home.

He didn't know how long he could hide there—maybe until Gordon returned from the hospital. All he wanted was a chance to rest and think.

He walked swiftly across the Cronin backyard, went up on the back porch. He found a wrench, tapped the glass in the kitchen door. He paused, held his breath, listening. Then he pushed his hand through the jagged opening and turned the key.

He walked through the house, drawn taut, trying to find Marge in

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here, the memory of her, the last lingering trace of her perfume to lessen the gloom of the melancholy night.

He entered a bedroom and even in the predawn velvet dark, recognized it as Marge's. He found her sizable collection of lotions still littering her vanity.

He switched on a small table radio beside her bed, turning the volume low. He set the dial at the all-night station. Music flowed smoothly, but its very softness increased his tension.

The music ceased abruptly. "Tonight, police announced that underworld leader Tony Carcole, ex-convict on parole on an old armed-robbery rap, was slain in a running gun battle with police detectives Martin Alonzo and Elwood Cardiac.

"It was believed Carcole may have been involved in the kidnap-murder of socialite Margery Cronin. Her testimony five years ago led to Carcole's being sentenced. Police verified the dying racketeer's alibi and he was absolved from any connection with the Cronin-kidnap-murder.

"Ironically, in his death-bed statement, Carcole said he had abandoned any idea of vengeance against Mrs. Cronin because getting started in the rackets again seemed more urgent. His new plans were destroyed—again by Mrs. Cronin—this time indirectly because her disappearance focused unwanted attention on Carcole and his parole violations.

"Meanwhile, police still seek William Wisdell, local advertising man in whose apartment Mrs. Cronin's body was located. Wisdell is sought for questioning in the death of Marlin Dix. Dix, according to police, may have had inimical knowledge of the death of Mrs. Cronin. Police are unable to explain Wisdell's flight in any light except that of guilt—"

Lights flared across the Venetian blinds. Bill snapped off the radio, moved across the room, peered through a blind.

A car was parked in the drive. A man got out, crossed the yard. He inserted a key in the front door, stepped inside, snapped on the light.

Bill padded across the room, stepped into a tightly packed closet. The scent of Marge was overwhelming. He bumped a row of shoes, breathless in the web of dresses.

He pushed through them, knocked over a box. Something toppled against his leg. He picked it up in order to find a place for his feet.

The wrapping of the bulky package rustled. He did not even hope the man in the front room failed to hear it.

He stood with the package pressed against his chest. Light spilled into the closet when the man touched a wall switch.

"You. In the closet, come on out.

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Move slow and keep your hands up."

Gordon's voice lashed at Bill through the dresses. "Try any tricks, you'll get a hole in your head."

Bill pushed through the dresses. He stumbled over a fallen slipper, sprawled forward into the room. He landed on his knees and stood up slowly, realizing he still held the package that had been hidden behind the hatboxes in Marge's closet. The name *Gracey's* leaped up at him.

He heard Gordon catch his breath.

Bill stared at the bulky package. He shook it open. The hunting jacket fell to the floor, sprawled with empty arms outflung.

"Sheepline." Bill's voice was taut in his throat.

"Don't try anything," Cronin said.

How calm he was now that he knew the truth, Bill thought. Everything fell into place. The only answer, that crooked window, that distorted dream, his mind trying to straighten everything that was just off-center.

Most off-kilter of all was the man in the middle of it. Cronin, weeping and sick, and hiding the jacket Marge had bought for him in her closet.

"I'll get rid of it. when I get rid of you," Cronin said. "You're what I want to be rid of. I waited for the police but they kept letting you go. I waited in your apartment tonight—"

"After you killed Marlin."

Cronin touched the bandaged wound in his side. "He tried to kill me. I wasn't going to pay blackmail, and he knew I'd kill him the first chance I got."

Bill winced. "Marlin's phobia—watching everything. He saw you using Marge's key, taking her body into my apartment. Because he was in debt, he came here, tried to blackmail you. You jumped him, but he got the gun, shot you and ran."

"Didn't buy him much."

Bill shook his head. It flooded through him, hurtingly clear now. "Who else but you could force Marge to leave Gracey's store quietly, without creating a scene?"

Cronin straightened. "I tried to tell her I'd kill her unless she came back to me, but she wouldn't believe me."

"You didn't have to kill her."

"That's where you're wrong. I wasn't going to let her go. I told her." He stepped forward. "I hired detectives. Months ago. They followed you. I decided to fix you both, but the cops kept clearing you."

"And they'll keep coming back to you, Cronin. They have to. Just like I did."

"That's too bad," Cronin said. "But it won't do you any good. It will be too late for you."

"You couldn't get away with

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killing Marge. This one won't even be smart."

Gordon's voice was dead. "I'm tired being smart. All I want is to fix you for what you did to me—"

"She was through with you, Cronin, before I came along. You drove her away yourself."

Cronin's voice broke. "Don't talk to me like that!"

"You killed her. You've robbed both of us."

"And now I'm going to fix you. Here's your souvenir Luger. I waited in your apartment. I could have made it look like suicide. Even the stupid fuzz would believe you admitted your guilt, killed yourself." Gordon shrugged his shirt up on his shoulders. "It won't look as good here. But I can make it stick. You came here, wild. I tried to talk to you. You admitted to me that you killed Marlin—"

"With my gun?"

Cronin's smile was etched in agony. "I used Dix's own gun, the one he got when he was afraid of me. I'll say you admitted using it."

"It won't stick," Bill said.

Cronin levered a cartridge into the Luger's firing chamber. "You been acting far-out, they'll believe you killed yourself."

"Not with my gun, Cronin."

Bill tensed, watching the mouth of the big German-made gun tilt upward.

"Don't pull that trigger, Cronin!"

Cronin laughed. "Beg. "Why don't you beg? You took my wife, and now you can beg. It won't do you any good, but I want to see you crawl like the slime you are."

Bill stood, arms out at his sides, waiting. He did not take his eyes from that gun.

"Beg, damn you!" Gordon said.

Cronin steadied the gun, fixing it on Bill's navel. His mouth twisted and he pressed the trigger.

The explosion rocked the house. The gun chattered and erupted. Gordon's face blossomed red. He staggered back, struck a table and turned slowly, falling.

He toppled to the floor and did not move. Part of his face and skull were blown away.

Bill swallowed back the sickness. The only prisoner he had taken during his tour in the occupation army at Stuttgart, and then only because the thief's Luger's mechanism fouled. He had kept the Luger, but he had never dared fire it.

His eyes burned. It was over now. Or was it? Would it ever end? Hadn't he stepped through a crooked window when he tried to take Marge? Wasn't he going to spend the rest of his life paying for that?

He shook his head. He had loved Marge, honestly and deeply. He would have given her up rather than see her hurt. He would never have hurt her and he would never forget her.

He looked at Gordon once more, then he stepped over the hunting jacket and went to the phone to call the police.

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YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE

by BILL PRONZINI

THE SKY was the color of a steel bar when I got down to Bay Fisheries that morning. The air smelled wet and damp. A sharp wind kicked down from the north, and the bay was all spread with white froth. We were in for some blow.

I came up onto the pier and Alf, this half-wit I use for a mate, was already there. He spotted me.

"Jack," he said. "Hey, Jack."

"Listen," I said. "Did you get the bait?"

"It's trouble, Jack," Alf said. "Big trouble."

I looked at him.

"No bait, Jack. Old Charley, he said no more bait. The Greek told him."

Well, now, wasn't this the topper? I said to Alf, "What about the fuel?"

Alf shook his head. "No diesel either," he said. "It's big trouble, Jack." He put his hand on my arm.

I shook it off. He was pretty rum-dum, this Alf, but as fine a mate as you could ever want. I was giving him five bucks a day.

"All right," I said to him. "I'm going to see the Greek. You wait here."

"Okay, Jack."

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Bullets were waiting for me out there in the night, and one had my name on it. I could run, sure. But how far, how long?

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I went across the pier. They had these big iron crab pots stacked to one side of the main building. Beyond them was a door set into the side of the corrugated iron. It was the Greek's office.

I stood there. This Greek had taken over Bay Fisheries six months ago, and he'd put on the screws. He'd cut the rate on salmon to low base, and jacked up the prices on bait and diesel.

It was slack season, too. The worst in eight years.

And now he'd cut me off.

I shoved open the door and went in there.

The Greek was behind this wide, gun-metal gray desk opposite the door, bent over some kind of ledger. A fat blowfish in shirt sleeves, with a blob of colorless putty for a nose, tongue held between stained teeth and glistening wet like a pink eel. Black ringlets lay on his skull like oiled springs.

He looked up.

"Jack," he said. "Hello, boy."

I slammed the door.

"All right," I said. "Let's hear about it."

"Take it easy, Jack," the Greek said. "Sit down."

"The hell with that."

He licked his lips. They were the color of spoiled liver sausage. He said, "I'm sorry about the credit, Jack. It was all I could do."

"Sure."

"You're a month behind, Jack. You're into me for four hundred."

"McGivern carried me for three months. And for twice that."

"That was McGivern."

"Listen," I said, "I can't operate without bait and fuel. And I can't pay you. What the hell do you want?"

"You got to look at it my way, Jack," he said. "I can't make any money with you owing me and going in deeper every day. These are hard times, boy. First thing you know, I'm carrying the whole fleet. It's just bad business."

"Look," I said. "There's rumors of a big salmon run. Down from Alaska. It'll be any day now. Give me another couple of weeks."

"I can't do it."

"So that's the way you want it," I said. "All right." There was no use in pushing it. He was a hard one, this Greek. I turned for the door.

"Wait a minute, Jack," he said. "Maybe we can work something out."

I came around.

"Sit down, Jack."

I just stood there. He got out a cigar and bit off the end. He lit it with some kind of gold thing on his desk.

He said, "I need somebody to do a job for me, Jack. A good man with a boat."

I stared at him. "What kind of job?"

"Nothing much. Just pick up some goods. That's all."

"What goods?"

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"That's not important."

I could smell dead fish. "What's the pitch?"

"You meet a boat," he said. "This boat will have a crate. You deliver the crate here to Bay Fisheries. That's it. Nothing at all."

I didn't like the sound of it. Not a bit. You could figure what it was. Contraband. Rum, maybe. They smuggle it out of Canada and bring it in on the coast. There's nice money in a deal like that.

It didn't surprise me much to see the Greek in on it.

I said, "You picked the wrong guy."

He blew out green smoke.

"Look," he said, "this thing's worth five hundred to me. Five hundred big ones, Jack."

I chewed that around.

"That squares you on the books," the Greek said. "And you got another hundred besides. All for a couple hours work."

I said, "I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it. Just do the job and take the five hundred."

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "Count me out."

"You better think about it, boy. You better think hard."

"Meaning what?"

"Just that," the Greek said. "You're cut off now, Jack. You don't play right with me, I can see you don't get a job cutting bait."

He was some boy all right. He'd set me up for this. He'd pulled my credit, and shoved me over the barrel. I didn't have a pot the way it was. It was either go along with him, or I was through. Some choice.

I clamped my teeth down tight together and took a breath. I said, "All right."

What would you have done?

The Greek gave me this wide, yellow smile. He said, "Good boy, Jack."

I just looked at him. Then I said, "What about the credit?"

"I'll take care of that with Charley," he said.

I went to the door and opened it. Behind me the Greek said, "You stick with me, Jack. You'll do okay."

"Sure," I said.

I went back to the pier. Alf was still there. "What happened, Jack?"

"Go see Charley," I said to him. "Pick up the bait. I'm going to have her gassed."

"We got credit again, Jack?" Alf said. "We all right?"

"We're all right," I said. "We're fine now."

THE THING came off with no trouble.

I put out from Bay Fisheries with the *Marietta II* at a little past ten that Friday. It was a nice night, and the stars laid out like bits of silver on black crepe. The storm had blown through now.

Up on the bridge I lit a cigarette. In the flare of the match I could

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see the brown envelope the Greek had given me, up there on the wheel housing. I knew what was inside, all right.

I took the *Marietta II* across the harbor and out past the breakwater. It was calm, and the bow, cutting through, spun just a few drops of spray against the open windshield.

They had it rigged up about five miles out, west by southwest. The Greek had given me the compass reading.

I cut the throttle down when I neared the place, like the Greek had said. They had this signal to identify us, two short flicks with the spot. I couldn't see much in the black, but then the light came on about five hundred yards to my right and falling southward. They blinked it on and off and I gave it back to them.

They held on the spot for a second to let me see where they were. I took the *Marietta II* up alongside. It was this big cruiser, about thirty-six foot, and sitting low in the water. I could make out two of them in the stern, standing at the rail.

I cut the engines and came down off the bridge. One of them tossed me a line and I made it fast.

This one jumped over onto the *Marietta II*. He stood there, looking at me.

"Jack," he said. "That right?" The Greek had given them the word.

"That's right," I said.

"Okay, Jack," this guy said. "Let's see what you've got."

I went up on the bridge and got the envelope and gave it over. He tore off the top and looked inside.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get at it."

I followed him over onto the cruiser. The other one was standing there, near the cabin. He had this big Thompson gun slung over one arm.

I stopped, looking at him. I felt cold.

This guy moved the Thompson gun just a little.

"Well?" he said. "Do you think this is a picnic?"

We went down the companionway and aft to the main quarters. It was dark. The guy turned on a pencil flash. I could see this big wooden crate against one of the bulkheads, strapped in heavy band iron. Stenciled across the face in black letters was: *Martins and Kelleher, Vancouver, British Columbia,* and below that, in smaller print, *Quality Fishing Line.*

The crate was pretty heavy. We got it over onto the *Marietta II* and into the wheelhouse, just the two of us. The other one stood out of the way with the Thompson gun, watching.

When it was done, the guy climbed back aboard the cruiser. He untied the line.

"Shove off, Jack," he said.

I fired up and turned her

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around and headed back. A sharp north wind had come up. It was pretty cold, now.

My stomach felt a little queasy, the way it had there on the cruiser. Those two had been a real pair of red-hots, for a fact. I got this bottle I kept inside and had a long one to ease me down.

I wasn't cut out for this kind of thing at all.

Have you ever seen the way it can get?

This salmon run down from Alaska petered out, and it was as if they had all died there in spawn. I was into the Greek again before two weeks were out.

I didn't have a place to turn. The Greek had me six ways from Sunday on this smuggling thing. I couldn't get back out.

I didn't like to think much about it. But there was plenty of risk. I scared me, all right.

But what could I do?

There was the money, too. It was five hundred for every run I made. Two a month, was the way the Greek put it to me. A thousand bucks.

I didn't like it. It was black money, sure enough. But you can see that I just didn't have any choice. I was caught up in it, and I didn't have any choice at all.

The Greek sent down word for me one morning after I'd brought in the second crate. He was stewing on something. He wanted to know was anything said to me when I was

out there on the cruiser? I said no. But that was all. You could see this thing eating him.

He sat there behind his desk. He said, "There's another meet a week from Monday night."

"All right."

"I'm coming along."

I looked at him. I wondered what it was about. But I didn't say anything. It was the best for me if I didn't know any more about it.

THE FOG had come in early, and by ten-thirty it was a gray blanket over the harbor. The Greek was there. He had a dead green cigar shredded between his teeth, and this blue mackinaw buttoned up to his throat.

We boarded the *Marietta II*. I got her warmed up, then backed her and got her turned around. The Greek came up on the bridge and stood with me at the wheel. He just stared straight ahead, out over the black water. It was eating him bad.

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We got past the breakwater. The wind was pretty strong. I put her wide open, and lashed down the wheel. I got out a smoke.

The Greek said, "Listen, have you got anything to drink? I could use one, boy."

I looked at him.

"Some rum," I said. I turned, and my arm brushed against the pocket of his mackinaw.

I backed off. "Hey," I said. "What have you got?"

He stared at me.

"It's a gun," I said. "What the hell?"

"Forget it, Jack."

"Listen, what's it for?"

"It's nothing for you."

"Is it trouble? Is that it?"

"Let it alone," the Greek said.

I didn't like this. I hadn't figured for it. The Greek looked at me. "Get me that drink, will you?"

I went into the wheelhouse and got the jug and brought it to him. He took a slug and handed me the bottle.

I had a long one. It trailed fire. I didn't like this at all.

I stood at the wheel. I tried to figure it. Something had gone wrong. It looked bad.

After awhile, we came near the spot. I cut the throttle, and the *Marietta II*'s bow sloughed down and she settled in her wake. The Greek was peering into the darkness. "See anything?"

"No."

"Are we on course?"

"We're out about five and right on. This is it."

I shut her off. It was quiet. All you could hear was the wind.

We waited. I lit another smoke and pulled one out of the bottle. I was pretty nervous, waiting.

And then this light came on, dead ahead of us, blinking the signal. I kicked my spot on and off, and I could hear the whine of their engines as they came toward us. After a minute I could see them, black against the lighter gray of the sky, and they came alongside. The two of them were at the rail. One tossed the line over and the Greek took it.

The first guy jumped over the rail, onto the *Marietta II*, He stared at the Greek.

"What the hell?" he said.

"Stow it," the Greek said. "Where's the shipment?"

"Did you bring the money?"

"Let's see the stuff first."

"All right," the guy said. "Come aboard."

We did that. The other guy stood a little way off, and he still had that Thompson gun. We went below decks and into the main quarters.

"Turn on some lights," the Greek said. "You can't see a damn thing."

"You're nuts," the guy said. "What if somebody should see?"

"The hell with it. Turn on some lights, I say."

The guy went over and switched

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on a lamp on the port bulkhead. The crate was there, like always. The Greek went to it.

"Get me a crowbar," he said to the guy.

"Are you flipped?" the guy said.

"Just get it."

"Listen—"

"Goddamn it!" the Greek said.

The other guy had come inside, and the first one looked at him.

"Get him the bar," the other guy said.

The first one went outside and I could hear him up on the bridge. He came back was a crowbar. The Greek took it. He pried up a couple of the boards across the top of the crate, and then used the bar to twist the band iron until it snapped.

There were these spools of fishing line inside, what looked like number 9 linen. I watched him. I had a crawly feeling on the back of my neck.

The Greek emptied about half the crate, and then he came up with this little metal box. It was taped shut.

He took the box and set it on the table aft. He looked pretty grim. He cut the tape and got the box open. The two guys just watched, not saying anything.

The Greek wet his finger and stuck it inside the box. He brought it out and licked it again. He looked at the two guys, and his eyes were black coal chips.

"It's been cut," he said.

Nobody said anything.

"Milk sugar," the Greek said.

"Well?" the guy with the Thomson gun said.

"Forty per cent milk sugar," the Greek said. "The last two shipments the same way. You've been cutting it, you bastards."

"What's with him?" the other guy said.

"Nuts," the guy with the Thompson gun said.

"Listen, you sowheads," the Greek said. He was getting pretty worked up. A tic jumped along his jaw. "I've got contacts on my neck over this cut stuff. I'm in hot water. I won't stand for it, you hear?"

"That's your troubles," the guy with the Thompson gun said.

"It's damn well your troubles, too," the Greek said. His voice was like a knife. "I want the pure, see? From now on, nothing but the pure. You got that?"

"You just got nothing to say about it," the guy with the Thompson gun said.

"I got plenty to say about it!" the Greek snapped. You could see it in his face. He'd gone over, all right. "I got this to say about it!"

It happened so fast then you didn't have time to think.

The Greek's hand jumped to the pocket of his mackinaw and then he'd gotten the gun out and came up with it, and this guy jumped on one side, his face a mask, and let go with a burst from the Thomspn gun. There was an awful roar, and the cabin lit up in orange flame.

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I pitched sideways against the bulkhead and went down with something stinging my shoulder, and covered up my head with my hands.

But I could still see the Greek, on his knees now, next to this table, with the gun still up and he fired twice. The guy came up on his toes, like you see these dancers do, and then spinning in a half-circle, and then he dropped and the Thompson gun clattered on the deck. The other one went after it, and got his hands on the muzzle, and then the Greek cut loose with two more and blew away the side of the guy's head.

It was very quiet. All you could hear was the slap of water against the hull as the cruiser rocked in her swells.

I lay there against the bulkhead. I couldn't move. The air was seered with burnt gunpowder.

The Greek got to his feet. He stood looking down at the two of them. His face was paste-white. He turned to me.

"We've got to get out of here," he said.

I got to my feet and leaned there. I was shaking like the palsy. I couldn't stop shaking.

The Greek grabbed the metal box off the table. He pushed me ahead of him down the companionway and up on deck. We climbed over onto the *Marietta II* and the Greek got the bottle and drank deep and then gave it to me. I got some down. My hand kept shaking and spilling it over my chest.

There was blood on my windbreaker. I opened it up. It was just a narrow groove in the skin. I rubbed my face. "God," I said.

"Come on," the Greek said. "Let's get out of here."

I went on the bridge and started her. The Greek cast off the line. I opened her full bore.

The Greek came up beside me. I had another one out of the bottle. I wished I could stop the shaking.

We'd gone a way. There was nothing in sight. The wind was chill. I could feel the sweat drying on my body. I looked at the Greek.

"You killed them," I said. "You killed them both."

"Take it easy," the Greek said.

"What did you want to go and bring that damn gun for?"

"I wasn't going to use it," the Greek said. He looked scared some, too. "I lost my head."

"What are we going to do?"

"Nothing. It's done now."

"What happens when they're found?"

"They can't tie them to us," the Greek said.

"But what if somebody saw us go out tonight?"

"None of that, now."

It was silent for a minute. I looked over at that metal box the Greek had.

"What have you got in there?" I said. "It's drugs, isn't it? Heroin, or something."

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"What did you think?"

Oh, Lord. I took a pull on the bottle.

"Listen," I said. "I want out of this. I don't want any part of it."

"You don't have a choice, Jack."

"I can't take this kind of thing," I said. "I figured it for rum-running. But drugs. And now murder, and almost dying out there. It's too much. I can't take it, I tell you."

The Greek's eyes glared black. "Now, listen, boy. If you know what's good for you, you'll do what I tell you. You just keep your mouth shut. That's all you have to do."

I was shaking so bad now I couldn't keep my hands on the wheel. What happens now? I thought.

Where does it go from here?

YOU DON'T really feel it all at once.

It takes some time. There is the shock at first. You put it out of your mind. You don't think about it.

I was sitting at the table in the kichen after we'd come in, with a bottle of rum, when it came on me. I was sick on the floor. I got to shaking so bad I had no control over my body. I was cold. It was like I was done up in the center of a block of ice.

After awhile it went away. But I couldn't stop the thinking. I began to drink the rum. I drank it straight and very fast. The bottle was empty. I got up to get another one from the cupboard. That is all I remember.

I came awake on the kitchen floor. Hot white light from the sun filtered in through the window. I felt very bad with it. I found the other bottle and took a drink.

I had to get out of there. It was like the walls were closing in on me. I drove down to Bay Fisheries. It was only seven-thirty.

Alf was already there, washing down the *Marietta II* with a hose. I came down off the pier and onto the board float leading to my slip. Alf waved. "Hey, Jack."

I climbed aboard. Alf shut the hose. He looked at me with his

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head kind of hanging loose to one side in that way he had.

"Jack," he said. "You don't look so good. You sick, Jack? You all right, boy?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm okay."

He came up close to me. His eyes were bright. He kind of gave you the willies, being this half-wit and all.

"Did you hear about what happened, Jack?" he said. "Did you hear the news?"

"No," I said.

"There was a shooting last night. The Coast Guard found this boat. There was two men dead on her, Jack. All shot up. Murdered."

I could feel pools of sweat in my armpits.

"One of the commercials come in with the news," Alf said. "Saw 'em towing her into the Coast Guard station at Bodega Bay."

My head pounded.

"It's a real mystery, Jack," Alf said. "Ain't it something? Ain't it really something?"

"Sure," I said. "It's something, all right."

I got away from there and went to the Greek's office. He looked like he hadn't slept at all. I said, "You know they found the cruiser?"

"I know," he said. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know."

"The Coast Guard will be along pretty soon," he said. "They'll ask questions."

"I can't take that," I said. "I can't talk to them."

The Greek said, "Now you take it easy."

"I can't talk to them."

"Look," the Greek said. "I don't like this any more than you do. But that's the way it is. I'll handle things."

"How?"

"Take the *Marietta II* out. Stay out all day. When the Coast Guard comes I'll fix up a story. You were with me last night. Playing poker. You stick to that."

"All right."

He looked at me. "You been on the booze?"

"Some."

"Well, you lay off. Hear that? You get on that stuff and go popping off to somebody; the both of us are stuck."

"All right," I said.

We took the *Marietta II* out, north towards Jenner. It was a bad morning. Alf had the lines out, chattering away. It felt like the top of my head would come off.

After a time I told him to lock up the outriggers. He wanted to know why, and if I was all right, and did I want to go in to see the doc. I yelled at him to shut it. He got all pouty like a little kid, and went into the stern and sat there and didn't say anything.

I stuck it out until three. I killed what was left in the bottle there in the wheelhouse. I got a little edge on. I felt a little better.

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We came in across the harbor. I figured sure to see the big gray Coast Guard cutter docked at the pier there. But there was no sign.

I found the Greek in the warehouse.

"What happened?" I said.

"They were here," he said. "It's all right. They hit a blank. Nobody saw or heard anything."

"What do they know?"

"They hit on the smuggling angle. But they won't find much."

"What's going to happen?"

"Nothing. We just have to play it tight for awhile."

"Sure."

He looked at me.

"Listen," he said. "I thought I told you to lay off the booze. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm scared," I said. "It's got me down."

"Just take it slow," the Greek said. "Everything's all right."

I just nodded. But I knew everything wasn't all right. I knew it wasn't all right at all.

I SAT in a rear booth in this little roadhouse a mile or two up the highway from Bay Fisheries. It's this place were the commercial crews hang out. But it was only just after six, and too early for the crowd.

I had a bottle of rum there in the booth with me. I'd been there four hours. I hadn't taken the *Marietta II* out in two days, since that afternoon.

Mostly I'd been on the bottle. The Greek was plenty sore at me for it. But I couldn't help it with the thing on me the way it was. It was the only way.

I sloshed rum into the glass and had it off. Up at the bar a hooker who worked the fleet spots along the coast, was sitting sideways on her stool, smiling, giving me the eye.

I lit a cigarette. The smoke was bitter. This girl got up from her stool and went over and put a quarter in the juke. She stood there for a time, listening. Then she came over to where I was and sat down across from me.

"Hello, Jack," she said. "Buy me a drink?"

"Sure," I said.

"Thanks." She poured one from the rum and hit it, and brushed this black hair away from her face. She looked at me over the glass. She wasn't a bad kid. I knew she liked me.

I could feel her leg against mine under the table. "You look sick, Jack," she said. "Troubles?"

I laughed. "No," I said. "Nothing like that."

She lifted her glass again.

"Well," she said. "Cheers."

I poured another drink and lifted it. I saw her smiling at me. I put the drink down. The girl's face began to dissolve in this kind of white fog. There was this sudden pain in back of my eyes. Locusts screamed in my ears.

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"Jack," I heard her say. "Are you all right?"

I covered my face with my hands and pressed a finger hard over each eye. The pain dimmed. I took my hands away. The white fog was gone.

The hooker's eyes were wide.

"I'm okay," I said to her. "I just need some air."

I stood up. My right leg felt numb. I took a step on it, and caught onto the back of the booth. I took another step, and I had some balance. I went across to the door and outside.

It was very hot. The air was still and choked with heat. You could see this kind of dark haze, like gossamer, over the sky.

I took deep breaths. The air smelled of salt and kelp and dark rain. It bit into the back of my nose. I could hear my heart thumping like a jackpump.

I went to my car and stood with my hands on the cold metal of the hood. I felt very strange. I wondered if it could be that I were losing my mind.

I started the car and swung up on to the highway. I had to see the Greek. There had to be a way for me to get away from here. I couldn't take much more of this.

I drove out past the cottage the Greek had. It was dark. His car was gone. Maybe he was late at Bay Fisheries on something.

There was sweat in my eyes, and down my back. I stared at the white line. After a time I could see the lot in front of Bay Fisheries. There was the Greek's car, and this other one. I had never seen it before. It was pulled in close to the building.

I could feel dark things on my skin. I slowed the car and pulled off the side of the road. I had this feeling there was something wrong. You could smell it on the heavy air.

I went across the lot and up on to the pier. The Greek's office was up ahead. The door stood open a bit, and there was a light on inside. I swung the door. It was empty.

I wiped sweat off my face. The locusts were back at my ears. I went along the pier, and around to the rear of the main building. The corrugated-iron doors into the warehouse were unlocked and open about a foot. I went up to them and looked inside. A night light on a post burned up near the front.

I stepped inside. The single light cast quivering black shadows. The silence was the crash of angry surf.

And then gray shadows detached from the black, looming shapes angling across the concrete floor. Another light came on, this from a big flash, and I saw the Greek.

He stood with his back to this long conveyor belt that stretched the width of the warehouse. His face was fishbelly white in the light.

I crouched down behind this fork lift, standing silent near another of the posts. The shapes, still

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moving, came almost into the circle of light from the night lamp.

There were two of them, in dark suits and wide snap brims. One of them held the flash, and the other this tan leather suitcase.

The Greek's eyes had hidden in the fat of his face. His lips worked. His voice carried across to me, echoing.

"All right. You've got the stuff. You've got what you came for. What happens now?"

"What do you think?" one of them said.

"Listen," the Greek said. He was sweating like somebody had poured water over him. "What happened there on the boat, it was an accident. You got to believe that."

"Doesn't make any difference," this one said. "Either way."

"Don't you see?" the Greek said. "It was cut stuff. They were cutting it."

"We know all about it."

"You know?"

"What did you think?" the guy said. "This is no two-bit deal."

"But I was paying for the pure."

"Oh, hell," the one who did the talking said. "You were paying our price for the cut. Just like the rest."

The Greek shook his head.

"Who did you think you were dealing with?" the guy said.

The Greek looked sick.

"No," he said. "Oh, God, I didn't know."

The other guy, the one who hadn't said anything before, turned to the first one.

"He's dumb," he said. "He's about the dumbest boy I ever saw."

"But nothing was said. Nothing."

"That's too bad for you," the first one said. "You should have stayed out of it."

"Please," the Greek said.

"Come on," the second one said to the first. "Let's get it done."

"All right," the first one said.

"Please," the Greek said again.

I saw the two of them back off a step, into the light, and then I could see the guns. The barrels looked a foot long. The one said, "This is it."

They planted their feet, with their arms straight out, stiff, and then the Greek made a sound like an animal in the night, and they opened up with the guns.

They made little popping sounds, not like a gun should sound at all, and the Greek spun around and slipped down to one knee, his hands coming up in front of him, and then one took him in the chest and another in the face, and he pitched forward and rolled on his back and lay still. But they kept pouring it into him until both guns were empty.

Then the two of them put the guns inside their coats. One went over and knelt down by the Greek and the other snapped the flash on him. He didn't have a face anymore.

I lurched to my feet and stum-

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bled over to the door and got outside. I went around the building and down off the pier. A gale wind had come up. It whipped my face.

I made it to my car and fell down by the rear tire. I pressed my face on the cold ground and lay there like that for a time.

Then I got to my knees and pulled the door open and sprawled inside. I started the car and let out the clutch. The tires screamed.

I saw the darkened windows of my cabin. I couldn't remember driving there. The lower part of my face had begun to tremble. I parked and got out and went inside.

The bottle was on the table where I had left it. I tilted it up. My stomach recoiled. I held onto the edge of the table. The smell was raw. I got more of the rum down and squeezed my eyes shut and it stayed there.

I took the bottle and went over and sat by the window. My head ached with pain I had never known before. I couldn't think. I drank more of the rum.

I knew they had killed the Greek. They'd done it because of the two men on the cruiser. But there was more to it than that. I didn't understand what it was. But it didn't matter now.

I knew they would be coming for me soon. It was the way they did things. I had been scared watching them do it to the Greek, but I wasn't scared now. It was too late for that.

If I'm going to get away it has to be now.

But how far can you run?

Not that far. Not ever that far.

I couldn't do it. I'd seen too much of it.

You don't know what it's like.

I sat there by the window and drank the rum. Out on the street, at the far end, I could see headlights.

It had begun to rain.

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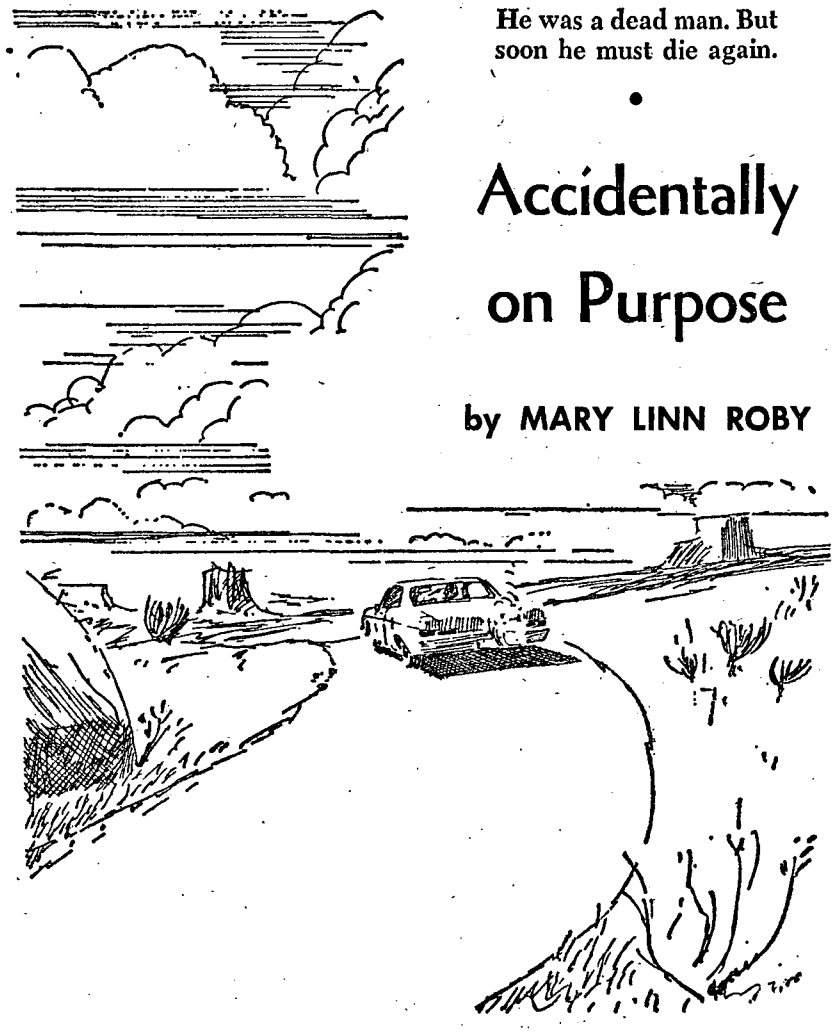
He was a dead man. But soon he must die again.

•

Accidentally on Purpose

by MARY LINN ROBY



THE TRIP through the West that summer had been as hectic as most of their vacations together. Perhaps even more so. Enclosed in the confined space of the car, they had got on each others nerves con-

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stantly, until their emotions were raw. Sometimes, glancing at her husband's profile, Ruth Burton felt that she had never known the meaning of the word hate until she had married Paul some ten years before.

Today even the weather seemed to conspire against their relationship. They were driving through the Bad Lands of South Dakota, and the flat, constant heat which made even the car's expensive air conditioner seem absurd pushed their tempers higher and higher.

"If we could locate a decent motel tonight," Ruth said, lighting a cigarette with quick impatient movements, "perhaps I could get a little rest."

Paul scowled at her. Outside on a railed bluff, overlooking a spectacular expanse of sun-baked rock and clay, a group of tourists huddled together, pointing and laughing, while the driver of their bus watched them wearily. Despite the way in which they were traveling, and the heat, and the squalling children, Ruth knew that most of them would take home fonder memories of the Bad Lands than either she or Paul.

"I don't know what was so wrong about the place we stayed last night," he was saying. "It had a swimming pool, didn't it? That's all you could talk about yesterday was a swimming pool."

"Yes," Ruth snapped, "and it also had a group of drunks who kept me awake until three o'clock this morning."

Paul eased the big car around a hair-pin bend.

"You should use ear plugs," he said, "like I do. Then you wouldn't have heard a thing."

Ruth butted her cigarette with so much violence that the sparks flew over the seat.

"You always have the answers, don't you?" she demanded. "Well, for your information, I can't sleep with ear plugs in. I've been telling you that for the past ten years, but nothing I say seems to penetrate your thick skull."

Paul muttered something to himself. The car began to pick up speed. They passed another lookout point, another group of tourists. Neither of them bothered to make a pretense of looking at the view. Ruth's fingernails dug into the palms of her hands.

She had had such high hopes in Paul ten years ago. He had been a handsome man then, an athlete. Not three years after they had been married he had started to lose his hair, developed a double chin which now made a caricature of his face, and grown a paunch which made it difficult for him to squeeze behind a steering wheel.

If the change in his appearance had been the only change, she could have put up with it. Paul's failure in his work had been even more bitter.

He had been so ambitious ten

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years ago! There was nowhere he couldn't go, nothing he couldn't do. And now what did they have? A comfortable four bed-roomed house in the suburbs, a cottage at the lake, a four-week vacation every year in which they could travel if they chose. Not so bad for ten years. Not so bad until you considered that this was as far as Paul Burton would ever go.

Ruth knew that this was true. She saw it in the eyes of his boss when he came to dinner. There was the humiliation of that, and the more intense shame which came to her when younger men received the promotions which Paul should have had.

Worse than this was the fact that now even Paul accepted this as his fate. He sought to go no further; this was the worst indictment she could make of him.

Ruth suddenly became aware that the sun had disappeared behind a dark cloud. A wind was beginning to whip across the dry hard-packed dirt, swirling grit across their window shield. It was still hot.

Paul had begun to whistle a little tune between his teeth. Ruth clenched hers. She hated him to do that, and he knew it. He was expecting her to say something. Well, she'd be damned if she would!

The ironic thing was that everyone at home thought that they were so happy. Ruth never talked about Paul over lingering cups of morning coffee. Other women complained freely about their husbands, but Ruth was too proud for that.

Besides, what she had to say about Paul passed the limits of simple complaining.

As so they passed as the perfect couple, despite the fact that there were no children and Paul would not consider adopting any. And all day long, day after day, Ruth sat in her well-scrubbed box of a house and felt like screaming.

She could have gone to work, of course. If she had had a reasonable husband, she would have. But Paul insisted that she stay at home. That was part of his pride. *His* wife didn't need to work.

It was beginning to rain now. Great waves of moisture struck the windshield. Paul turned on the wipers.

"I've been thinking," he said, turning the car onto the main road. "When we get home, we'll have to see about getting some more insurance."

Ruth gritted her teeth.

Here it came again. The insurance argument. They had it at least once a month. It was as good a way as any of getting rid of their tensions.

"You don't need any more insurance," she said slowly. "How many times have I told you that? We're insurance poor already."

Paul scowled.

"If something were to happen to

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me, what would you be getting? A lousy seventy or eighty thousand."

If Ruth had thought that he wanted more insurance because of a real concern for what might happen to her after his death, she would have been touched. But she knew by now that all he actually wanted to do was to drape himself with yet another symbol of middle class security. And in Paul's mind there was no better symbol than insurance. He bragged about his coverage with the boys. Ruth had heard him.

"Be sensible," she said now in a sharp voice. "You're only thirty-two years old, Paul. You're not apt to die immediately. And, if you do happen to be involved in an accident—a fatal accident—double indemnity would be involved. That seventy or eighty thousand would become a really substantial amount. Enough to keep me quite adequately until—"

"Until you could marry again."

It was difficult to see the road now because of the driving rain. Ruth saw him bend forward over the steering wheel. Even that small physicial effort was obviously a strain to him. Ruth could see that his breath was short. She knew that it must be the light which was making him seem so pale. That was one thing about Paul. He was never sick.

And then, just as the thought had passed through her mind, he collapsed over the wheel. The car swerved to the right. Frantically, Ruth grabbed the wheel, throwing her body to the left, reaching out with one foot for the brake, entangling her legs with the solid dead weights that were her husband's.

If it had not been for the straight flatness of the road, she would not have been able to have averted a crash. As it was, the car came to a stop by the side of the road.

"Paul!"

Ruth took her husband by the shoulders and raised him from the steering wheel. Just a few inches. It was enough. She could see the blueness around his mouth, hear the labored quality of his breathing.

Lowering him to the wheel, she pushed her way out of the car and ran to the side of the road. Another car was coming. Ruth hailed it. The man driving needed only a few words from her to sail into directed action. Disregarding the rain, he helped her move Paul to the other side of the seat, and insisted on taking the wheel himself, leaving his own car parked and locked just ahead of where she had driven off the road.

"I live in this little town up ahead," the elderly man told her. "Your husband's had a heart attack if I'm not mistaken. I can get you to old Doc Fowler in five minutes."

"But there's nothing wrong with Paul's heart," Ruth murmured.

Doctor Fowler disillusioned her on that score. He was a white-

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haired old gentleman, gracious in an old fashioned way. Paul had been conscious even before they had reached the doctor's house, but it had been decided that he rest there in a spare bedroom for the remainder of the day.

"If we had a hospital, he could go in there," the doctor told her. "But don't you worry, little lady. I've made a cardiograph check on his heart. That's what it was, sure enough. Heart attack. You say he'd never had one before?"

Ruth nodded. There had been plenty of time for her to think while the doctor had been busy with Paul, and now she was aware of a nebulous idea, floating just beyond her mental grasp.

"He doesn't have to know," she said. "Does he?"

The old doctor stared at her.

"Well, now," he drawled, "I don't suppose he *has* to know, but it would be sure as heck better for him if he did. In the first place, there's these pills he'll want to take. And then, he ought to cut down on his activities. Fact of the matter is, of course, when he gets home, he'll want to go to the best heart specialist he can find, and—"

"Yes, yes," Ruth said impatiently. "I know that. I'm not suggesting that he not take care of himself. I'm just saying that I think it would be better if we told him it was the heat that made him collapse today. You can give him some of these pills he needs to take, and I can drive the rest of the way home. It will be simple to explain to him that he shouldn't exert himself after that prostration. That *is* what you call it, isn't it?"

The old man shook his head.

"It's just that I know him so well," she said. "If he thinks there's something wrong with his heart, he'll magnify the whole thing so much in his mind, be so certain that he's going to die at any moment, that he'll be a nervous wreck by the time we reach home. It won't do him any good to be told at this point. Believe me."

He believed her. In the end, Ruth always found people did believe her.

They drove home by easy stages, staying at the best motels. Paul accepted her explanation that the heat had caused him to pass out. And when, once they were home, he told her he was going to call his insurance man, she did not enlighten him about the state of his health. For Ruth was playing a different game now.

Paul did not seem particularly surprised that she did not rebel this time about his taking out more insurance.

"I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking," he said jovially. "I spoke with Lew this afternoon. I'm going to take out another forty thousand, right on the nose. Wait until I tell Ralph and the boys. One hundred thousand coverage! None of them can top that."

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His very naivete made Ruth want to weep.

Even Paul noticed the change.

"You've certainly been a new woman since that trip west," he told her. "What did I tell you? All that you need is a chance to get away from things once in a while. All this talk about jobs, children. Nonsense. I can always tell when you begin on one of those two subjects that you're tired. Next year we'll go to Hawaii. What do you say to that?"

Ruth said nothing. If she had her way, Paul would not be around next year for any sort of vacation. Besides, at the moment, she was absorbed in developing plans for one vigorous weekend after another. In the autumn they went hunting together. Ruth had never handled a gun before in her life, but she learned.

There was no end to the number of things she was willing to learn now. Not when the prize was one hundred thousand dollars. Day long hikes through the woods tired Paul. She could see the new lines in his face. But he would not admit to exhaustion.

"Feel like a new man," he told everyone he met. 'It's just as Ruth says, a fellow becomes an old stick-in-the mud if he doesn't develop new interests. Now golf is fine, but it's not really exercise, not with your electric cars and that sort of thing. No sir. And this winter we're going to take up skiing."

It was the skiing that finally did the trick. For awhile Ruth had been afraid that it was not going to work, and that she was going to have to turn to something like bowling instead. But, one afternoon, after a long day spent on a famous New Hampshire slope, Paul collapsed in the car on a wooded lane leading back to their ski motel.

He did not suffer. Ruth had admitted to herself for a long time that she wanted him to die, but she was not cruel. If Paul had seemed to be in pain, she would have driven him immediately to a hospital. She was fortunate. It happened, just as it had happened before, except that they were driving much more slowly because of the ice on the roads.

Paul gave a great sigh, suddenly, and slumped over the wheel. And, just as she had done before, Ruth grabbed the wheel and put her foot on the brake.

But this time Paul was not simply unconscious. He was obviously dead. Having parked the car awkwardly by the side of the road, Ruth leaned back in the seat and had a cigarette. First there were the practical aspects of the matter. She thought about arrangements for the funeral, how she would have to call Paul's mother, whether or not she would keep the house. She decided, in the end, that she would not. It had represented failure for too long.

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Perhaps she would travel. Yes, that was it. One hundred thousand American dollars would take her a long way.

Ruth butted out her cigarette. She was completely relaxed. If someone were to come along this lonely road, she knew that she had only to explain that her husband had just collapsed. There was no rush. Besides, she hated the thought of having to touch him.

And then, while she procrastinated, she remembered the double indemnity clauses in the four insurance policies. Each policy was worth double the amount in case of accidental death. Two hundred thousand dollars! She said it aloud, rolling the words over her tongue.

Why not?

Ruth remembered, in that second, that high icy hill that she and Paul had driven over on their way to the ski slope that afternoon. They had thought for awhile they would not make it, but their snow tires had helped. From the top there had been a magnificent view of the white mountains.

"We'll have to stop on our way back," Paul had said.

They would stop, all right!

Ruth went to the other side of the car, opened the door, pushed Paul over to the other side of the seat, and got behind the wheel. Everything went smoothly. Things always did when Ruth was in charge, as the the girls in the Women's League always said.

The hill was just a mile away. The sun was casting long shadows over the snow as Ruth parked the car. She noticed that the mountains were rosy with sunset. Paul had been right; it was a magnificent view. It was almost a pity, she thought as she turned the front wheels of the car toward the abrupt drop to the left, that Paul could not see it. He had always been a great one for views.

Getting out of the car, she pulled her husband back into the drivers seat. Accidentally her hand touched his. He was still warm.

Hurriedly Ruth shut the door and went around to the other side. She wanted another cigarette desperately, but she knew that there was no time. It seemed to be a deserted country lane, but some one might decide to take the same route back to the motel.

Drawing a deep breath, she leaned across Paul and pulled the emergency brake off. His paunch pushed her arm against the wheel. Ruth grimaced her disgust. Next

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time she would be more careful about bald spots and fat and lack of ambition.

Slowly the car began to move. It gained momentum as it lurched across the ditch and into the snow-covered field. Ahead lay a pine forest. Ruth opened her door and jumped out, rolling in the white softness. She lay there for a moment, supine, staring at the sunset sky, waiting for the crash. When it came she pulled herself into a sitting position and looked.

It was better than she had dared to hope. A thousand feet away, what was left of the car was enveloped in flames. Nothing would be left to indicate that Paul's death had not been accidental.

Rising, Ruth carefully brushed the snow off herself and began walking up the hill. It was only then, as she neared the road, that she saw the car and the state policeman standing beside it. Glancing back toward the flames, she saw another man in a blue uniform running toward what was left of the car.

"All right," Ruth said defiantly as he approached her. She could tell from the look in his eyes that he had seen everything. "All right. I wanted to make it seem like an accident. That's no crime. He died of a heart attack."

The policeman held out a pair of handcuffs.

"That's odd," he said. "From where I was standing, it could have been murder."

Ruth pulled away from him.

"But it wasn't," she said impatiently in that brisk competent voice she always reserved for fools.

And then she felt the cold metal close about her arm.

"Prove it," the policeman murmured. "Just try to prove it, lady."

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THIEVES KNOW WHERE TO LOOK

by HAL ELLSON

She was my ruler, I her slave.
She had everything, I nothing.
But not after tonight. Tonight,
you see—I would kill her . . .

GREY LIGHT breaking through the dusty curtains caught the amber of the whiskey as Meg raised her glass.

"To Satan," she toasted. "I'll soon be with the bloody ape."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like

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that," said Bob, her brother-in-law, who was fifteen years her junior, a short man who was lazy by preference and superstitious by nature.

Meg tasted her whiskey, the best money could buy, and set down the glass. A wry smile lit her face.

"Well, it's the truth," she said. "You know it and I know it. Look at these thinning arms and wrinkled hands. Look at my face, my eyes. Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

"Death."

"Meg, please don't talk like that."

"Damn it, what do you expect me to talk about? I know what's coming and I'm not afraid. I've had a long life and a good one and that's all that matters."

"What matters is to go on living and to think of pleasant things."

"And pull the wool over my eyes? Oh, no." Meg shook her head and her sagging jowls trembled. "The writing's on the wall and I've read it clear. There's no other words and no way out—and do you know what's holding me together?" The old woman's voice dropped to a whisper. "This," she said, lifting her glass. "That's all that stands between me and the Devil."

"Oh, Meg, such talk."

"Rot," she snapped. "You and your damned superstitious drivel. You're worse than an old Irish biddie and frightened to death of nothing."

"Of nothing, did you say?"

"Except what may be in your own heart. People who are afraid have reason to be because of their sins, but they have a way of putting them off and assigning them to the Devil."

"Ah, it must be the whiskey," said Bob. "You talking like that, saying I'm a sinner."

"We're all sinners, the best of us."

"But—"

"Oh, shut up and drink your whiskey."

Bob's brows lifted, then; meekly he raised his glass and had his taste. The very best, he thought, placing the glass back on the table. It was the one good thing he could commend Meg for. Otherwise, the old miser hadn't a penny extra to spare for her barest needs, much less himself, who'd put up with her loony whims and fancies so long.

Now his eyes took in the room and finally focused on the curtains. By nature they were white, but for want of a washing they'd turned a morbid grey and, with the dry-rot on them, they were on the verge of crumbling.

Dust and dry-rot, he thought, and looked at Meg. In the spent and weary light sluicing through the curtains he saw the truth, a dying woman whose world had toppled long ago.

"I guess you're right, Meg," he said. "There are things to be faced. Of course, it wasn't for me to mention the matter. It wouldn't have

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been proper, but you yourself said you don't have long to go. That being the case, it would only be proper to put your affairs in order. Now I happen to know a fine lawyer."

"I have one," said Meg. "He has seen to everything. I've made out my will."

"A will is the only thing. It protects those who come after. They can't be cheated," he said, thinking of himself.

"No one will," Meg said quietly. "I made sure of that. It wouldn't be fair to all those little boys."

Little boys? Was she going mad? "What little boys?" he said.

"At the Catholic orphanage. You know, I never had any children of my own, and—"

He couldn't hear the rest for the roaring in his head. Cheated! The old rip had stabbed him in the back. The old—

Black sludge was invading the room. Dark. Dark. Then yellow light exploded from the oil-lamp on the table. He stared at Meg as she set the wick.

"That's better," she said. "It gets dark so early now."

He blinked at her as if in a trance, and slowly gathered himself together. What had they been talking about? Why had the room darkened so suddenly? Meg's hand lay on the table and caught his eye.

"Bob," she said, "I think you'd better go up and nap a while. I'm afraid you had one too many again."

One too many? So that was it. As much as he liked the stuff, he was no drinker, never a match for Meg.

Unsteady, he rose from the chair and started for the door with Meg smiling at him. From behind came her voice as he teetered through the kitchen and into the dark and narrow foyer: "Bob, mind you, don't break your bloody neck on the stairs."

Warning or deriding him? He didn't know which, but it hardly mattered now. He had to lie down and bring himself together. The small room over the stairwell. Somehow he made it and dropped across the bed.

He was stone-cold sober when he awoke. A clock ticked on the bureau. Nine on the dot. A strange hour to wake, he thought, wondering where he'd been before taking to bed. A few moments passed and he realized he'd been drinking with Meg. A few more moments and he recalled her terrible revelation.

All the years of waiting and now the money was going to strangers, orphans at that.

Oh, she'd cheated him all right. He was convinced of that, convinced that a reckoning was due in spite of what she'd done. It was then that he recalled her lighting the oil-lamp and adjusting the wick. Even drunk he'd missed something. Now he knew what it was—the ring which she always wore was gone from her hand.

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Had she already bequeathed it to the horde of orphans?

Oh, no, it wasn't for them. She couldn't fool him. She'd hidden the ring, and it was his. The one thing she couldn't deny him.

As always, the hallway was dark. He gripped the bannister and swore as he descended the stairs. Meg was in the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"Of course," he said, flushing and sitting down.

"I thought you were good for the night, the way you went off."

Digging at him again. His throat was blackening and swelling with blood, his angry eyes telescoping. Oh, she had always laughed at him and made him feel inferior. Money did that to people, gave them power, advantages and aggravating conceits. But what pained him most was the whiskey. Her whiskey.

He remembered the time he'd bought his own bottle and she wouldn't touch it.

"Do you call that slop whiskey?" she'd said in his face. He hadn't forgotten and never would, so it was always her whiskey that he drank, which rankled, but not half as much as his inability to outdrink her. Each time he tried disaster and humiliation followed. Even now she was laughing at him, but the last laugh would be his—and the diamond ring. Thinking she could fool him, the doddering miser.

"Aren't you going for your walk tonight?" Meg asked him now.

"Walk? No, I think I'll sit in this evening."

"Good. The house feels so empty these days. All my old friends are gone."

"Well, I'm still here," he let her know.

"Yes." She let out a sigh and looked at him from the depths of her faded eyes. "It's no good to grow old, Bob. You don't know what it feels like to see the world coming apart and everything changing. It's terrible when you can no longer go along with it."

"I thought you weren't afraid," he said.

"Oh, not of dying. That's something that has to be. Growing old is a different matter."

"That also has to be."

"But it's harder to accept."

"One must. After all, what else can a body do?"

"I know. I know." Meg chafed her hands and looked toward a closet. "It's going to be a long, long night. Would you care for a little drink?"

About to refuse, he thought better of it, for the whiskey would liven her up, and if she had enough —"I suppose I could go just one to clear my head."

"If you don't mind. It's in the closet."

He arose and opened it and there they were, a whole array of bottles with various labels and all expen-

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sive. He picked one, brought glasses and poured.

Half-past nine by the battered clock in its greasy niche. He noticed this and lifted his glass. Again, when his eye wandered to the ancient time-piece, he was astonished, for an hour had elapsed. The drinks, he thought, looking at Meg who was now her usual self.

In fact, she was in an extremely gay mood, while he only pretended to be, for he was waiting the moment when he could put the question of the diamond ring to her. The moment came when she rubbed her hands to soothe the ache in them.

"What happened to the big diamond?" he asked. "You didn't by chance send that off to the orphans?"

"Oh, no. That's going with me when they lay me out."

"But you always wear it. What made you take it off?"

"It bothered me. I suppose it's the rheumatics." She lifted her hand with its distorted joints and shook her head.

"A very valuable ring," he said. "I hope you have it in a safe place."

"Oh, yes. No one would ever find it."

"Maybe so, but thieves know where to look." Bob nodded, drank his whiskey, set down the glass and gazed at Meg. Her face was blank as a board. The whiskey reaching her. She must have been at it while I was sleeping, he thought. A little more would do her good, put her on the run.

"If you ever lost the diamond," he said, shaking his head. "You've got to make sure, Meg. You know?" He splashed whiskey into her glass. "It's got to be a safe place."

Meg supped the whiskey, then looked at him, grey eyes watering, jowls sagging, flesh a terrible ashen hue. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust, he thought. All of us turn back to dust, but a diamond—

"It's in a safe place," said Meg.

"Where?" he said quickly, thinking to catch her off guard, and she tasted her drink again, then smiled at him crookedly. "And why are you so interested?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he said back. "Your interests have always been my interests. That's why I've stayed here all these years, to look after you. You should know that. You should—"

"I know. I know, Bob. My interests." She smiled, but the drinks were doing tricks and he couldn't judge the meaning of her smile.

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"If you'll pour for me," she continued. "I don't trust my hands."

He obliged, filled his own glass and lifted it. "To many more nights like this!"

"And may the whiskey be always as good," Meg added and drank, spilling a bit, an astonishing thing for her.

Going, thought Bob. She's at the end of her rope. For the first time he felt like a man before her. For the first time he was going to put her under the table. As for the big diamond— He cleared his throat. "Meg, as we were saying."

"What were we saying?"

"The big diamond."

"Ah, now don't you worry about it. It's in the safest of places and nobody's going to get his dirty hands on it."

"Meg." He reached across the table, refilled her glass, then took her hand firmly in his. "Meg, come to your senses. You can't afford to be foolish."

"Foolish? It's many a year since I've done anything foolish." She swallowed some whiskey and smiled at him. "Ah, but you're the pest. Will you let me be?"

"Not till you tell me where the diamond is."

Meg shook her head and groaned. "All right. It's in this room."

"Where?" he said, still gripping her hand, but harder now, exerting a pressure that was almost painful.

"That's for me to know and the bloody thieves to find out," Meg answered with a maudlin cackle.

Like an old witch, he thought, releasing her hand and splashing more whiskey into her glass and his own.

"I don't think you trust me, Meg," he said in a hurt voice.

"Ah, but I do. You're the only one."

"Then—"

She nodded to an ancient sideboard, a dusty thing cluttered with expensive glassware and cheap souvenirs. In the very center of the piece sat an enormous ball composed of wrappings of tin-foil that had taken years to assemble, a purposeless object of no value.

"It's in there," said Meg. "I buried the ring in that ball of foil."

"You must be joking."

"Oh, no. It took hours, what with my aching hands and all those wrappings. I put it dead in the center. Now tell me, do you think any one would ever think of it as a hiding place?"

"I doubt it," he said and quickly hedged, adding, "But one never knows what a thief will take."

"Well, if one takes that, then he's welcome to it." Meg moved her glass, and he filled it again— this time with a nervous hand, for now he knew what had to be done. It's only a matter of time and patience, he thought, and waited while they drank and talked. Finally he saw the signs, the trem-

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bling hand, spilled liquor, lisping speech. She was ready to pass out.

"Meg." He raised his glass, but she didn't respond, her head had fallen forward, her eyes were closed. Dead away, he thought, but to make certain, he pinched her hand and down came his glass. He arose, went to the sideboard, picked up the ball of foil and brought it to the table, then set to work. With nervous fingers he began to remove the sheets, a method that was achingly slow.

He lifted the ball of foil and lugged it off to the cellar. A single neat cut with an axe and he split it like a melon. Out fell a small piece of rolled paper. Quickly he unraveled it, thinking it held the diamond ring, but there was nothing inside it. Nothing? A single scrawled word caught his eye—Tricked. She'd tricked him again. Furious, he ran up the stairs and into the dining room with murder in his heart.

But here, too, the unexpected occurred, for Meg was wide awake, smiling, and the room was turning wildly and sickening him. Something was wrong, something — Light flashed and, pure and white as a star, he saw the big diamond sparkling on Meg's hand.

"You dirty, rotten thief," she said slowly, putting the words through him like knives. "Oh, I didn't want to pull that trick, but I had to. Now I feel sorry for you. I was leaving you everything, but you spoiled it. You fool, you spoiled it, hear me? You don't get a cent."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I made no will, and that stuff about the orphans was a lie."

Slowly he sank into a chair. Too much had happened at once, his brain whirled. Cheated, he thought. The old rip had pulled the wool over his eyes, and she wasn't drunk. Even that way he couldn't win.

"Better have a drink," said Meg. "I'm sure you need it."

Goading him again. He wanted to sweep the bottle from the table, but he couldn't deny his need for the stuff. It was a new bottle that stood on the table.

Trembling, he uncapped it and poured for both of them. This time there was no toast. They drank in silence, then gazed at each other in that stark and terrible silence that held the house.

A faint, mocking smile lit Meg's face. She was studying him, watching the blood darkening his features and the rage gathering within him.

She wasn't frightened. She'd always held the upper hand and always would.

He's not even a man. He learned nothing from this. Nothing at all, she thought, and glanced at the big diamond. How it sparkled tonight, and to think he had intended to steal it. Sighing, she shook her head. "If only you hadn't been so

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greedy, Bob. How foolish, how stupid."

His face almost black with anger, he could barely restrain himself from throttling her, yet somehow he did. Stupid? Yes, but hardly as much as she thought, for hadn't she said there was no will, that the bequest to the orphans was a lie?

Leaning forward so that his breath touched her face, he said, "But I'm still the only heir you have."

"You were," said Meg. "Tomorrow I'm seeing my lawyer. You won't gt a bloody cent, you poor daft—"

"And what makes you think you'll see him?" he said, leaning closer. "You're so smart, but that's one you won't figure out, old woman."

"You intend to kill me, don't you?" Meg said with unexpected calm.

"That's right. You've always won, but not this time," he answered and suddenly he grabbed her throat. Oddly, she didn't resist, nor try to cry out. Instead, a smile lit her face and so unnerved him that he released the pressure on her windpipe, enabling her to speak and speak she did.

"Do what you wish," she said. "You still won't get what you want."

"What does that mean?" he said, thinking she was stalling for time, but she wasn't. She knew what she had done and that both of them were doomed. "You see," she said, "when you went down the cellar, I poisoned the whiskey, you poor, poor fool."

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HOLD MY HAND

He had told his dying little wife: "I can't live a single day without you." Now at long last, was his time to prove it . . .

by FLETCHER FLORA

GILBERT SKELLY was not the kind of man who commits murder. If he had not been too timid to risk the consequences, which he was, he was too civilized. Besides, to do him

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justice, he was simply too kind-hearted. This is not to say, however, that he was incapable of anticipating the death of another with pleasure, nor that he did not read, as Mr. Clarence Darrow once said of himself, certain obituaries with satisfaction.

For something like two years Gilbert had longed earnestly for the death of his wife. It is to his credit that he did not, in all this time, express himself to that effect or do the slightest thing to contrive an event he would have welcomed. He was, on the contrary, the soul of tenderness and devotion, and his enduring patience in trying circumstances must be considered admirable even though his wife was, indeed, dying. The trouble was, she was such a long time about it.

There was not a single friend of Gilbert's, male or female, who would not have been shocked and incredulous if the true state of his mind had become suddenly apparent. He was universally esteemed for his selfless dedication, and frequently he was held up as an example by wives to their husbands. And if the latter were somewhat irritated by this practice, they were at least forced to concede that old Gilbert was, for a fact, a very decent fellow.

Some of them suspected, of course, that he was finding elsewhere what was no longer available at home, but he could hardly be blamed for that. After all, he was still a young man with a young man's appetites. He was discreet; that was the important thing.

Her name was Enid, and she was dying at the age of thirty. The name and nature of her fatal disease had been explained to Gilbert in layman's terms, and a kind of time schedule had been tentatively established by which he could measure her inevitable decline.

For comfort's sake, she was put into her own bed at home under the care, during the day, of a practical nurse. At night, after he returned home from the firm of architects where he was employed, Gilbert took over. He was a good nurse, none better, but he was also a great deal more. He was a comfort and a companion, attentive and solicitous and the most artful liar imaginable.

Enid knew that she was dying, of course, and was resigned to it. In fact she romanticised it, and Gilbert, for his part, made it felt by a thousand subtle words and expressions that his own life, when she was gone at last, would be desolate and joyless, virtually over. More than once, sitting beside her bed, he wished aloud that he could take her place and face death for her.

He even implied clearly a time or two that he would consider it his good fortune if death would be so considerate as to take him with her, the two of them together in the same hour. After all, the pretense

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did him no harm, and it did her much good.

It was understood that her fatal disease would eventually reach a final stage, when it would be necessary to put her into a hospital. This dreadful time, when it came, would indicate the imminent end—the end of all things whatever for Enid, the end of posing and benevolent guile for Gilbert. In the meanwhile, there was Myrna.

Myrna was a tall, black-headed, sloe-eyed girl who somehow looked, even in tailored suits, like a renegade houri. Actually, she was nothing of the sort. She was a perfectly respectable Irish girl, age twenty-six, who happened by the falling out of circumstances to be engaged in a discreet affair with a married man. She would have rejected the affair if there had been no hope of eventually making it legal, and she conducted it, as it was, with a firm hand and judicious restraint.

This doesn't mean that Gilbert was not allowed concessions. Myrna had a nice apartment, and Gilbert was welcome there whenever conditions were favorable. Fortunately, or unfortunately, his nocturnal nursing chores at home limited his visiting privileges and reduced the risk of detection and talk. The restricted relationship would scarcely have been tolerable, of course, if it hadn't been supplemented.

As it happened, however, Myrna worked in the same office as Gilbert. Contacts there and lunches and cocktails taken together, while not comparable to dinner and the theater and what might have developed therefrom, were at least sufficient to sustain what would have otherwise died.

Myrna did not actually long for Enid's death. She merely longed for union with Gilbert. And if the former was a prerequisite of the latter, it was unfortunate, of course, but there it was.

But patience, as usual, paid off. It was decreed at last by Enid's doctor that the time had come for Enid to go to the hospital and face the grim business of counting off her remaining days.

A bed was reserved, and Gilbert, the day before she was to go, requested an indeterminate leave from the office, hoping all the while that the leave would be brief. After the closing hour, when he took time for a quick martini with Myrna in a nearby lounge, he explained developments while working down to his olive.

"Darling," he said, "I'm afraid I won't be seeing you for a few days."

"Why not?"

"Poor Enid is going to the hospital tomorrow. She can't last long now."

"How long?"

"Possibly hours. Probably a few days. Afterward, of course, there will be the funeral."

"Of course. Darling, call me tonight when you get a chance."

"I shall. But now I must hurry

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home. Enid will be waiting for me, and it will be our last night together there."

"I understand. You have been very loyal and devoted, Gilbert, and I love you for it."

"Yes, I have nothing for which to reproach myself. Nothing to regret."

"Darling, I want to kiss you. Do you think I dare?"

"Better not. Soon we will have better than kisses."

"You're right. We've waited so long, a little longer won't matter."

So they compromised by touching knees under the table and hands above it, and after a few minutes, his glass dry and his olive devoured, Gilbert said good-by and hurried home.

After dismissing the nurse, he went into Enid's room and pulled up a chair beside her bed. Her eyes were closed, and the pallor of death was on her thin and wasted face, but the breath of life still stirred on her pale lips.

"My dear," he said, "how do you feel?"

"Quite tired. I'm so weak, Gilbert. If only I weren't so weak."

Her eyes opened, and she turned her hand palm upward on the bed. He took the hand, cold compared to the hand he had lately held, and pressed it gently.

"You mustn't distress yourself. Are you in pain?"

"Not much. I've been sedated. I shall go to sleep soon."

"That's good. That will be best."

"No. There will be time enough to sleep. I want to stay awake. I want to hear your voice. Read to me, Gilbert. The book is on my table."

She was fond of the poems of Christina Rossetti, especially those concerned with death, and he had read them to her over and over, so many times that he could almost repeat them from memory, and she herself, surely, could think them through silently without error. But she liked him to read them aloud, clinging in a way to the comforting sound of his voice, and it was, after all, little enough for him to do.

Now he released her hand and picked up the book, opening it to the page marked by a narrow blue silk ribbon attached to the book's spine. As he anticipated, the poem at that page was the famous sonnet, Enid's favorite of them all. He began to read:

" 'Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.
Remember me. . . .' "

As he read the sonnet, her hand stirred on the covers in a feeble groping gesture, as if trying to effect the sense of the words, and he reclaimed the hand with one of his, holding the book in the other as he

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finished the fourteen lines. Her eyes were closed again, and two tears crept out from under the shadowed lids and down her cheeks.

"You're crying," he said. "I won't read any more."

"It's all right. I'm only sad at the thought of leaving you."

"If only I could do what the sonnet says. If only I could hold you by the hand and somehow make you stay."

"Dear Gilbert. Now it is you who is sad. You mustn't be, my dear. Think of what else the sonnet says: *'Better by far you should forget and smile/Than that you should remember and be sad.'*"

"I don't think I'll ever smile again, and I'll certainly never forget. How could I? Dear Enid, I love you so much. I don't know how I'll ever survive without you."

He felt the faint pressure of her fingers. She was silent, her eyes closed and the tears drying on her cheeks. Her pale lips smiled in resigned and sorrowing peace.

"I'm feeling so drowsy, Gilbert. I shall fall asleep soon. Do you know what I'd like very much before I fall asleep?"

"Name it and you shall have it."

"I'd very much like a small glass of sherry."

"Do you think that would be good for you?"

"My dear, what harm could it do me now?"

The question exposed his absurdity. It was fatuous, at least, to worry about the health of a person who was in the final phase of dying. It would be cruel, moreover, to deny so small a want. He stroked the back of her hand and stood up, smiling sadly.

"Very well, my darling. Just lie quietly, and I'll be back in a moment."

He went downstairs to the liquor cabinet in the living room and poured out two glasses of sherry. Carrying a glass in each hand, he ascended the stairs carefully and returned to Enid's room. He set the glasses on her bedside table in a litter of boxes and bottles.

She was still lying on her back, and he arranged her pillows against the headboard and helped her into a sitting position. The exertion made her cough, a series of shallow sounds more like a desperate gasping for breath, and she turned her face away from him to hide a trickle of saliva that leaked from a corner of her mouth.

"Are you all right?" he said anxiously.

"Yes. I'm all right now. I'm sorry, Gilbert. Will you hand me a facial tissue, please?"

He searched the litter on the table.

"There doesn't seem to be any here. The box is empty."

"There's another box in the bathroom, I believe."

He went to look for it and found it, after a couple of minutes, tucked away in the linen closet. When he

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returned to the bed and sat down in his chair, she had apparently recovered.

"Forgive me, Gilbert. I have made life very difficult for you."

"Nothing of the sort. You mustn't think that for an instant."

"You're so kind. So good." She smiled wanly in a pathetic effort to secure a touch of gaiety for this moment. "Now, will you please hand me my glass, Gilbert. We shall have our sherry."

He put a glass in her hand and took up the other.

She lifted hers slightly in the gesture of a toast.

"We must drink to something. What shall we drink to?"

"Whatever you wish."

"To whatever comes hereafter, Gilbert. To the future."

She drained her glass of most of its wine, and he, although he preferred to sip his sherry, did likewise. He set his glass once more upon the table and placed hers beside it.

"Dear Gilbert," she said. "Dear kind Gilbert. It will be better this way. Much better."

Her words, he thought, were strange, and he began to feel what at first was no more than a vague uneasiness.

"I don't understand, my dear. What will be better?"

"To die at home. A few hours or days earlier, that's all. Here at home with you."

So that was it! She had put something in her sherry! She had somehow acquired and saved for this time the means to escape, at the end, the bleak, impersonal horror of the hospital.

He leaned forward, looking at her intently, seeking in her face the evidence of whatever drug she must have swallowed.

"What have you done, Enid? What in God's name—?"

She lifted her hand from the covers, reaching toward him, and his words caught in his throat, choking him.

He took her hand and was astonished at the sudden strength in her fingers.

"I couldn't bear to leave you, Gilbert. I couldn't go away and leave you all alone with no one to love or to love you. Hold my hand, my dear. *Hold my hand and come with me.*"

The terrifying sense of what she said was instantly clear in his mind, and in that same instant he felt sudden, swift interior pain soar upward to his heart. Trying to rise, he slipped forward from his chair onto his knees beside the bed, as if he asked her benediction. But she had fallen back against her pillows and did not move.

Nothing moved again in the passing of the night, neither moved nor made a sound, and in another room a mile away the telephone did not ring.

Next morning, when they were found, Enid and Gilbert were still holding hands.

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INVISIBLE WEAPON

by ROBERT TURNER

There was nothing to stand between them and a perfect if guilty love. Nothing but a dirty little thing—Murder.

THEY WERE sitting on the patio by the side of the swimming pool, sipping daiquiris from frosted glasses and discussing their problem for possibly the hundredth time. As usual, they were getting nowhere.

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Roberto was wearing snug white swim trunks that showed off his mahogany tan and his lean, whippet-like physique. His handsome features were creased in a frown as he watched Henrietta, the maid, finish scraping off a plastic cross that had been pasted across the huge sliding glass door that closed off the game room from the outdoor patio, to prevent anyone from accidentally running into the door when it was closed. There had been several near such accidents before this had been done.

Now, with the plastic strips finally removed, Henrietta began spraying the door with glass wax.

"You haven't been listening to a word I've been saying, Roberto," Lucille Glover said peevishly. "Well, it's *your* neck, not mine, that's involved."

He turned to look at her. She had the piquantly pretty face of a woman at least five or six years younger and the golden, sleekly firm figure to go with it. She carried herself with the poised hauteur of a woman who is used to money and the things it can buy.

Class, Roberto called it. She had class written all over her. He couldn't understand how she could have stayed married this long to a crude buffoon like Ed Glover.

"It's odd that you used the word neck," Roberto said.

She shrugged and continued to rub suntan lotion on her softly curved upper arms. "Well, I don't suppose Ed would actually break your neck if and when he catches us together, but he'll certainly be violent and you'll be physically hurt. Especially if he's drunk. You know how insanely jealous he gets when in his cups."

"Yeah," Roberto said. He turned back to watch Henrietta, now polishing the inside of the great glass door. "But it was Ed's neck I was just thinking about."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm not sure yet. It's still difficult to believe that he won't give you a divorce if you push him hard enough."

"That's because you can't get it through your handsome head, Roberto, that my husband is a sadistic monster who, though he knows I haven't been in love with him for years, nevertheless considers me his private property. It gives him intense satisfaction to keep me trapped in marriage to him, even though I'm no good to him for any practical purposes."

"Then he's just asking for it—for you to get rid of him in some other way."

She screwed the top back onto the sun lotion bottle and set it down beside the chaise-longue, then reclined in a more comfortable position.

"There is no other way," she said tiredly. "We've been all over that."

"I know. He's cut you out of his

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will with one dollar. The rest of the four or five million go to his relatives and that stupid university where he played football. All you get at his death is a lousy quarter million. A half million if the death is accidental. Only that doesn't sound like such peanuts to me, Lucille. Properly invested, we could live a pretty damned good life on that sum."

She yawned. "We could get along, I'll grant you. But what's the good of even thinking about that? Despite his heavy drinking, Ed is strong as an ox, physically sound and will probably outlive me. Nor is he accident prone. In fact he's almost abnormally cautious."

"And we'd be out of our minds to even think about trying to rig up some kind of accident for him, because the insurance companies have had every trick in the book tried on them and it's impossible to beat them."

"Of course. You saw the printed sheet of statistics on the subject, the long lists of almost every type of accident that have been tried and failed, that Ed gave me. He thought it was very funny to discourage any such notions I might have, damn him."

Roberto watched Henrietta push the sliding glass door completely open and back into its sheath in the wall, then pick up her rags and pail and turn to Lucille Glover.

"Miz Glover," she said. "That's it for the day. It's almost four o'clock. I'm goin' to leave now, ma'am, if it's all right with you."

"Oh, that's right," Lucille said. "It is Thursday, your night off, isn't it? Run along then and enjoy yourself."

The maid ducked her head and vanished into the house.

Roberto said, softly: "What the insurance statistics *don't* list are the accidents that do succeed. Because they're never determined to be anything else. There must be some of those, if only a few."

Lucille sat up, looked at him quizzically. "So?"

"I've thought of one."

For a long moment she didn't answer. She leaned toward him, her whole lithe body tense. A pale blue vein showed at her temple. Almost hoarsely, she whispered: "What is it?"

"If I do have something foolproof, would you really go through with it? It wouldn't bother you to see him dead?"

"You know better. I hate his dirty, rotten insides. It's probably the only way I'd ever be free of him. What is it, Roberto?"

"I want to think it out a little more before we even discuss it. Right now I can't do that."

"Why not?"

He stood and walked over to her. She watched the tigerish, lean-muscled grace of his movements. He bent and tilted up her chin and lowered his face. His mouth closed

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gently over hers. It was he who finally broke the kiss.

"Because I have other things on my mind right now," he said. "Let's go inside."

Her face was flushed. She allowed him to take her hand and help her up from the chaise-lounge. With their arms locked together, they walked from the patio into the game room, then through to the house proper.

Later, smoking a cigarette, she said to Roberto: "You know, it's just weird enough to work. People have been badly hurt, a few even killed in that kind of accident. It's fairly common."

"In fact it's happened once to Ed, already. He bumped into that damned glass door and bloodied his nose. Just lucky he was moving slowly or he would have crashed right through it. Henrietta cleaned it today so that you can't even see it's there. Especially at night. It's not our fault she forgot to put a new strip of tape across the glass, afterward."

"But suppose he *does* think to check, to stick out his hand first or something? Suppose he doesn't run through the door?"

Roberto shrugged. "That's tough. So we blew it, that's all. So he'll run out and yank you out of the pool, be a big hero to himself for saving your life."

Her eyes began to glitter with excitement. She rubbed her graceful, long-fingered hands together. "I think it will work, though. In the first place, he'll be loaded when he comes home from the club. The first thing he'll do will be to go to the playroom bar for a nightcap.

"I'll stay in the shadows like you said and he won't even know I'm out on the patio until I scream and fall into the pool. It's got to work. He'll go flying out there; won't even think about the glass door, not seeing that strip of tape there. But, Roberto?"

"Yeah?"

She studied him, searchingly. "Are you sure you'll have the stomach to do what you might have to do? You know, if he doesn't get cut fatally?"

The suddenly grim cold look in his dark, thick-lashed eyes gave her the answer. He didn't even have to say that he would be capable of picking up a jagged chunk of broken glass and severing Ed Glover's jugular vein, if he had to. She had to repress a shudder and jerk her gaze away from Roberto's.

"We're going through with it," he said. It was a statement and not a question. She nodded, still not looking at him.

He went over and took hold of her hand, squeezed it, surprised at its sudden coldness.

"Buck up," he said. "It won't be that awful and it'll be over fast. You won't even have to look at him afterward."

She shook herself all over and turned back to him, gave him a

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small weak smile. "I guess it can't miss, at that. You'll be hiding behind the pump house. If he doesn't go crashing through the glass like a drunken bull elephant, you'll just remain out of sight. If he does, pull me out. Roberto, don't wait too long. Like most non-swimmers, I get panicky in deep water."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "If it works, I'll be the witness. I was at the bar with Ed and we heard you scream, then a splash. Knowing you can't swim, Ed went charging right through the door. Then *I* fished you out of the pool. The insurance company won't have a chance of breaking that one."

"I hope you're right," she said.

It worked just that way. At nine-fifteen that evening Ed Glover came home from his club. He went to the game room bar for a night-cap drink. He had swigged only half of it down when there was a scream from the patio and then a splash. He looked out and saw his wife floundering in the deep end of the pool. He set his drink down on the bar and ran to help her.

The plate glass door snapped with a sharp crack of sound and then fell outward in a thousand razor-edged shards and slivers. The huge bulk of Ed Glover, already bloody from a hundred cuts, sprawled face down in the jagged glass debris. A triangular shaped slice cut through the side of his throat as he landed and his life began to ebb out in steadily pulsing spurts.

Roberto came out from behind the pumphouse. He moved to the edge of the pool, after glancing once at Ed Glover's motionless figure and stood there watching Lucille's arms flail and listened to her gurgled cries of distress. He didn't move.

After awhile he watched her go under one last time and sink slowly to the bottom of the pool. Then he turned back to Ed Glover, checked his pulse, relieved that it wasn't necessary for him to personally finish the job. He was careful not to step in any blood.

He left by the rear patio gate and went across the dark vacant lot there, to where he had parked his car. He felt a little sorry for Henrietta, who would discover the gruesome scene when she returned to work in the morning and would probably feel personally guilty for not replacing the tape on the shiny glass door, thus being responsible in some way for this terrible tragedy—a man killed while rushing to save his drowning wife.

Back in his own apartment, Roberto began to pack. He thought it was about time he returned to his wife Julia. He was sure that she wouldn't give him any more problems after his three-month absence. Besides, she would need him to comfort her over the loss of her first cousin, Ed Glover and to help her wisely invest the million dollars that would be her share of the estate.

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